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LOVE IN FETTERS

By the Same Author

A Master of Deception

Violet Forster's Lover

Twin Sisters

The Interrupted Kiss

Molly's Husband

**CASELL & CO., LTD.,
LONDON, NEW YORK,
TORONTO & MELBOURNE.**

LOVE IN FETTERS

BY
RICHARD MARSH



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LOVE IN FETTERS

CHAPTER I

AWAKING FROM SLEEP

HE could not think what had happened. He woke with a start, a most amazing start, out of the strangest dream—a dream of happiness in which, surely, he told himself, his eyes scarcely yet wide open, Elsie had been with him. And now—where was he? What had happened?

It was a second or two—so profound had his slumber been, so startling the shock which had broken it—before he could remember where he was. Then, with a start, he tried to get up, to find that he could not.

He made an effort to realise the situation. He had been travelling from Marseilles to Paris in a first-class compartment, with Inspector Jenner as his sole companion. They had not long passed Lyons when he went to sleep. Where were they now? What was the matter with the train?

It broke upon him by degrees that something must be the matter with the train—or, at least, with

B

I

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that part of it in which he was. The carriage seemed to be standing up on end. Instead of there being a level seat on which he had been reclining, he was down at one door, and the seat on which he had lain down to sleep rose at an acute angle towards the other. The train seemed to be standing still. What did it mean?

Then it dawned on him that something had happened to the compartment. Surely it was narrower than it had been when he lay down to sleep? Where was Inspector Jenner? Something was wrong with the lamp in what he took to be the roof, though it seemed to be in an odd position. The glass seemed to be broken; the jet of gas was flaring unprotected, licking the woodwork, scarring it, blackening it. If something were not done presently it would be in flames.

There must have been an accident to the train while he slept. The shock had awakened him. Why had it not awakened Inspector Jenner? Where was he? He tried to stand up. As he did so he came into contact with something. It was a hand, which was visible between the seats; he had been lying on it. The compartment had telescoped; the seats had been jammed together; Inspector Jenner was between them. He was lying on what was left of him. The inspector must have been thrown off his seat just in time to be crushed to death.

Moving as well as he was able, he saw the upper part of the inspector's body—his head, his shoulders,

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nearly down to his waist. Fate had been so far merciful that death must have been instantaneous.

What an awful thing to have occurred. What a dreadful situation he was in. Ronald, still trying to collect his thoughts and to realise his surroundings, awoke to the presence of the handcuffs on his wrists. When he went to sleep he was the dead man's prisoner. And now was he his prisoner still?

In an emergency Ronald's wits moved quickly; sometimes too quickly, so that he acted first and repented afterwards. Shut up in the wrecked compartment of the ruined train, he began to appreciate the situation with almost eerie clearness. He had seen the inspector put the key of the handcuffs in a side pocket of his jacket. Could he get at it? Kneeling, he dragged at the dead man's clothing. One side of the jacket came loose; it proved to be the one in the pocket of which was the key. How was he going to unlock those handcuffs? He put the cross-bar of the key between his teeth and gripped it firmly; then tried to insert it into one of the locks. Several seconds passed before he succeeded; then he thrust it home. Then, gripping the metal as well as he could with his fingers, he twisted his wrist in an endeavour to induce the lock to open. He had seen the trick done upon the stage, when he had been struck by its simplicity; he did not find it so easy in practice. He tried, and tried, and tried, but the lock would not be persuaded to yield. What was he to do? Someone might come at any moment; he

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would be interrupted. Then what would be the use of doing anything? He would have to continue his journey as someone else's prisoner instead of Inspector Jenner's.

If his teeth would only grip the cross-bar better! If only his fingers would not slip! If he could but persuade the thing to yield! He made one more almost despairing effort. The thing did yield! The key turned; he had but to give a jerk; the gyve fell open. One hand was free! Perspiration stood upon his brow; the sensation of relief was so great that he reeled. Then his wits quickly cleared again, his presence of mind returned. Unfastening the other wrist, he slipped the handcuffs into his pocket. It would never do to leave them in the compartment. An explanation might be required of their presence.

What was he to do next? He remembered that he had no money. The inspector had all his; he had taken charge of it when arresting him at Nice. He knew that some of the notes were in the letter-case in the breast-pocket of the inspector's jacket. He had seen him put them there. It was a horrible thing to have to do: to rob the dead—every nerve in his body told him so—but for him it was a question of life or death. He had to. He got at the pocket somehow, emptying it of its contents. Among them was the warrant for his own arrest. What a lucky thing he had found it! What should he do with it? He had better put it in his own pocket and get rid of it, together with the handcuffs, at the first con-

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venient moment. He also had the letter-case; it was stuffed with French bank-notes. He himself had had nearly thirty thousand francs. The inspector had arrested him as he was leaving the Casino after a lucky afternoon at the tables. That part of his money which was not in the letter-case must be in the inspector's bag. The inspector's bag had been thrown off the rack on to the seat. Should he open it? It was locked. The key was somewhere in one of the inspector's pockets. He would have to get it. His own bag was locked also; the inspector had his key—the inspector had all that was his, including his watch and chain, his cigarettes and matches. He recollected, also, that the inspector had in his bag such papers as had been found in his possession. He certainly ought to have them. He would have to find those two keys for his own bag and the inspector's.

Yet, when it came to the point, he could not; it must needs be such a hideous quest, with most of the man jammed to a jelly between those seats. He would have to take the bags, and trust to fortune to provide him with the means of getting at their contents.

It now became a question of how he was to escape from that compartment. Although probably only a very few minutes had elapsed since he had awakened to the realisation of what had happened, already the bared jet of gas was bidding fair to make what was left of the compartment a mass of flames. The wood-

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work of the roof was crackling, tongues of fire were licking it. He could not get out of the door near which he was; that, apparently, was pinned to the ground. He would have to get out of the door at the other end, which rose above him at an angle of probably more than fifty degrees. He would have to reach it by the aid of what was left of the luggage rack, with the probability of finding, when he got there, that it was jammed.

He did reach it. He had to pass that gas-jet to do so, and the atmosphere up there was unpleasantly hot. The door was jammed, as he had expected; the handle, when he tried it, refused to budge. The glass in the window was splintered; long, sharp points remained in the frame. He had brought the two bags up with him somehow. He thrust the inspector's through what was left of the window, dashing it against the bar without, which gave way as if it had been made of straw. Clearly it had suffered with the rest of the train. He sent his own bag after it. Then he followed. He was slenderly built; it was easy for him to pass through the window frame; but he caught his hand on a splinter of glass, which cut him severely. He raised himself as he gained a precarious footing on the side of the upturned carriage; then dropped on to the line. As he dropped he was conscious that a tongue of flame rose into the air from the compartment which he had just now quitted.

The drop was longer than he had expected. The carriage had been thrown on to a bank at the side.

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The end from which he dropped had been raised several feet above the permanent way. He fell awkwardly, almost stunned. So nearly were his senses driven out of him that the original business had to be done all over again. He had to realise where he was, and what was happening about him. This time it was not easy. It had been bad enough within the compartment; without it was like pandemonium let loose. The night air was full of dreadful sounds. Steam escaped with an extraordinary hissing noise from the broken engine. The hot water which heated the compartments hissed with it. Human beings shrieked and wailed and shouted; men, women, children, some in an agony of pain, some in a frenzy of terror. How the tragedy had come about he did not understand—no one seemed to understand. He rose to uncertain feet with a feeling that all these things must be happening in a nightmare, the most dreadful of all his dreadful dreams. Not all of the train had fared equally badly. People who had escaped from some of the compartments were running up and down, aimlessly shouting something to they alone knew whom. It was dark; the sky was clouded; it was not easy to see anything. He heard a voice say to someone he could not see, speaking in French :

“The train has been thrown across the down line—the express is coming from Dijon—I am going to try to stop it with my lantern. The good God help us !”

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Someone ran off. He could see he was carrying a light. He supposed that one guard had been speaking to another, and that one of them was about to make a forlorn effort to stop an approaching train by using his lantern as a danger signal. If an express train came into them as they were lying helpless there, would anyone be alive to tell the tale?

Under ordinary circumstances, Ronald Denton would have kept his head sufficiently to see in what direction his duty lay. Before this he would have realised that his first duty was towards his fellow-sufferers. Exactly what had happened he still did not know; but he did know that the train was wrecked, that he had got out of it practically uninjured, and that all about him were people in the direst need of help from someone. Unhesitatingly he would have strained every nerve and spared no pains to render all the help he could. But that was one of the supreme moments of his life. There had been first one, then another, and that was the third. In each of the other two moments he had failed, as he was to fail in the third. There might have been hope for him had he, to use an idiom, stayed to face the music and play the man. But he did not play the man. He thought only of how, a few minutes back, he was being taken, with gyves upon his wrists, to an ignominious fate, and of how, as by a miracle, he had been freed. It did not occur to him that freedom had come in this strange guise in order to give him an opportunity of rising on stepping-stones of his

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dead self to higher things; of proving that in him there was at least the material which goes to the making of a true, honest, single-hearted and unselfish man. Perhaps he was not quite himself in that wild hour, because he was only able to realise that it behoved him to take the greatest possible care to preserve the freedom which he had so strangely won. With the inspector's bag in one hand, his own in the other, he crossed the line, climbed the steep bank, which was on the other side, made the best of his way over what seemed open meadows, which were on the top, and left that ruined train behind.

CHAPTER II

FORTUNE'S FAVOURS

FORTUNE continued to favour him. He had not gone far, picking his steps as well as he could over the uneven ground in the darkness, when he came to a road which, rough though it was, was better than the open ground. Just as he reached it the loud screech of a steam whistle rent the air. It was possibly the express from Dijon. Had that broken-voiced guard, using his lantern as a danger signal, warned it in time? Turning, he perceived that there was a signal which was much more obvious than any which could be given by the glimmer of a lamp. Flames rose in the direction from which he had come; the ruined train was on fire. He realised, even then, that this suggested a rather horrible state of things; but, in spite of a dim consciousness that his point of view was a selfish one, the dominant feeling in his mind was that it would be all the better for him. If, for example, the compartment in which was the dead body of Inspector Jenner was consumed by flames, it might be taken for granted Ronald Denton was burnt with it; in which case he would be at liberty to begin his life over again, hampered by no past and by no ties. He told himself, with a grim sort

Fortune's Favours

of humour, that in that case that railway smash might turn out to be an excellent thing for him.

He was probably at a distance of nearly half a mile from the line. The wails and cries of people beside themselves with pain and terror which had dogged his footsteps had died away. But, as he stood there, reflecting on the ancient adage, which has it that one man's poison is another man's meat, the night was disturbed by a tumult of discord, which must have travelled far across the silent land. The whistling of the engine had not ceased. Now there came a grinding, rending noise, the ominous significance of which sent his heart up into his mouth.

"I believe the express has run into the wrecked train. What's to be done?"

Nothing by him. He paused, merely, it almost seemed, to make sure. Then, as if fearful that a claim might be made on him to help in the work of salvage, he moved with quickened steps along the road which he had found. He heartily wished, to do him justice, that such an uncomfortable noise would cease to come from the direction of the line; it did suggest, to an imaginative person, so many disagreeable things.

Yet when he had gone perhaps another mile that noise was with him still, growing fainter, but uncomfortably perceptible to the dullest ear. He had been carrying the two bags, Inspector Jenner's in his right hand, his own in his left. In the state of high tension at which his mind had been physical things had gone unnoticed. He had been to all intents and

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purposes unconscious that he was carrying two bags ; now, all at once, the consciousness of their presence became overwhelming. He had to drop them both upon the roadway. He had had no idea that they were so heavy. They had taken so much out of him that he had positively to sit upon the inspector's bag, because his legs were so unsteady. He obviously would not be able to carry them very much farther. He was not used to bearing burdens. How he had got so far was a mystery ; and then his hand was bleeding. No doubt his blood had drabbled the inspector's bag—the handle of the bag had stuck to the wound. He took out his handkerchief, and bound it up as best he could. Then, after an interval, during which he endeavoured to recover from his state of breathless exhaustion, he pursued his way.

Still fortune favoured him. Now that he had become aware that he was carrying two good-sized bags, it was only with difficulty that he could proceed with them at all. First one arm seemed to be coming out of its socket, then the other ; they banged against his legs. Every few yards he had to put them down and shift them, in the hope of getting a better balance. Just as he had decided that he would have to abandon one, and get along as best he could with the other, he became aware that, only a few yards in front, close to the roadside, loomed the shadow of a building which might be either a cottage or a shed. If it was the first, he might be able to obtain rest and shelter, perhaps food and drink ; if it was the second, it might

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still serve him as a haven of refuge for what was left of the night. It turned out to be an open shed. It was not easy to determine, in the bad light, exactly what kind of a shed it was; but he surmised that it was possibly used as a shelter for cattle in inclement weather. He needed shelter as much as ever cattle did, so he went in. There seemed to be no floor beyond the bare ground, and that he had more than a suspicion was none too clean. One of the bags would have to be to him a seat.

He had taken a box of matches out of Inspector Jenner's pocket; the inspector had taken great care to see that not a match had been left in his possession. It was a wooden box, nearly full; they would go only a very little way towards lighting him through the night, especially as there were matters, in which the bags had a prominent place, with which he wished to deal before the morning. He could not even open the bags without a light by which to see what he was doing. He struck a match. It was only a bare shed. A small heap of stones seemed to be its only contents; that might be a better seat than the bag, which seemed to him to be the acme of discomfort. He dragged the bag over to the heap of stones. As he did so his foot came into contact with something which was lying on the ground. He lighted another match to see what it was. It was a rusty piece of metal attached to a wooden handle, which might at one time have done duty as a billhook. Could he open one of the bags with that? He had a notion

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that in Inspector Jenner's bag there were the remains of a packet of candles, to say nothing of a lantern. If he could only get at them they would be useful. Igniting a third match and picking up the ancient tool, he examined the lock of the inspector's bag to see in what way to deal with it. It was an ordinary Gladstone bag with two locks. The billhook would not be of much use in persuading them to open; they would have to be prised, which would be a pity. It would look bad if he arrived at an hotel with a bag which had obviously been forced open. He wished that it would not be necessary to take the inspector's bag with him at all. Yet what was he to do with it if he did not? He could not leave it in that shed. It was of capital importance that there should be in existence nothing which could serve as a clue to his identity. A keen-witted individual, coming on that bag in that queer place, might draw his own conclusions. Ronald Denton wished to run no risks. He would have to take the bag, with the locks forced open.

It was not easy to force them open, even with the aid of the billhook. He was making a woeful mess of the thing; the frame gaped in more places than one, but the locks held. The state of that bag would need a good deal of explanation; and yet the thing remained shut. The bad light was against him; he had to be chary with his matches. What was he to do? He had never forced a Gladstone bag open before; he had had no notion that it was so difficult.

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Short of tearing it to pieces, there seemed to be no way of getting at its contents with the tool he had. In his irritation he brought down the billhook on one of the locks as if it were a hatchet. Something gave way. The lock was open. The bag was damaged beyond repair. The curiosity of any landlord would be justified if a strange guest came to him with a bag like that. And yet the other lock continued firm.

That hatchet stroke would not do a second time what it had done the first; there must be some trick about it which he had caught by accident. He chopped, chopped, chopped. The lock held. He took the frame, which gaped at one end, in his two hands, and dragged it asunder. The bag was open at last, and also done for. So great was his annoyance at the trouble the thing had given him, and at the unsatisfactory nature of the result, that he swore aloud. While the words were still issuing from his lips he sprang to his feet and looked around. Someone was laughing.

That his solitude was likely to be disturbed was the last thing which would have occurred to him. In that seemingly unpeopled part of the world, who was likely to be abroad at that hour of the night—or was it morning?—except himself? Yet, here was someone laughing. He was not more startled by his first waking in the ruined train. He was not a nervous man; but he was even terrified. There, on the open side of the shed, seen in shadowed out-

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line, was a figure—the figure of a woman. Was it hallucination or—was it a woman? How came a woman in such a place, then? Yet the figure kept on laughing, and it was feminine laughter.

When the laughter ceased there was silence. As the ancient writers have it, his tongue seemed to be cleaving to the roof of his mouth, so that he could not speak. A light, flashing through the darkness, flared in his eyes with such sudden intensity that for a moment he was blinded. The figure on the threshold of the shed was holding what seemed to be an electric lamp, which was more perplexing than ever. In that corner of the world, who would be likely to have an electric lamp? Then a voice said, with an accent which was neither quite English nor quite French :

“I can see you quite plainly, but I do not think you can see me.”

Then words came to him.

“Who the devil are you?” he cried.

“Perhaps I am the devil, in the shape of a woman—who knows?”

“Put down that lamp. You are blinding me with the infernal thing.”

“What does it matter if I am? Is it not better that people like you should be blind?”

“Who are you? What do you want? What do you mean by coming here?”

The laughter came again. It seemed that his questions were found amusing.

Fortune's Favours

"My good sir, I am who I am. What I want is not yet your affair. I am here because who has a better right to be? You certainly have not."

The lamp moved forward with the figure bearing it. She examined him all over. He resented the scrutiny, while realising that it was not in his power to prevent it.

"You do not seem to be an ill-looking person on the whole. Age, I should say, perhaps not more than twenty-five, with the bearing of what you in England call a gentleman. What explanation have you to offer of your presence in my shed?"

"Your shed? Is this your shed? How am I to know it's your shed?"

He was stumbling for words. What he wished to say was not what he was actually saying; yet, though his tongue was apt to be such a ready one, he could not help it.

"Your words hardly point to your being a gentleman; they hint that you are entitled to doubt my word. If I blow this whistle my servants will come and tie you hand and foot—though not with handcuffs." She paused, as it seemed to him, with such intention that his pulses quickened. "When they have tied you, then you will begin to learn that it is indeed my shed. You are the kind of person who needs to be taught a lesson very well; so that, sometimes before he has it well by heart, it has marked him as with a brand." She paused again before she added: "You—escaped felon!"

CHAPTER III

THE WOMAN WITH THE LAMP

THAT was for Ronald Denton a night of many emotions, but perhaps the strangest of them all came to him when the woman with the electric lantern uttered those three words: "You—escaped felon." And he had only a few moments before been congratulating himself that for him life was to begin all over again, with a clean slate to write on what he chose. He could not speak; he did not want to; he could not if he had wanted; he stood stock still, trying to get the better of the something which seemed to be paralysing his whole being. At last the woman commented on his silence.

"You seem to be full of conversation." She came farther into the shed, continuing to cover him with the light as she moved; to the man, blinded by the glare, she was invisible behind it. He only knew that the light came on. A voice came out of the blackness beyond. "I think I'll sit down on that heap of stones if you will have the goodness to take yourself farther from it."

He obediently moved away, but was all at once pulled up.

"Don't go too far, I've a gun in my hand—see."

The Woman with the Lamp

He was conscious of the flash of metal as she held something across the face of the lamp. "I shan't hesitate to shoot if you do try to move too far, and you'll find that I'm a first-rate shot if I do."

What manner of woman was this, who went about with what she called a gun in such a place at that hour of the night, and talked so coolly of using it on him? Perhaps it was because even his senses were partly blinded by the glare of the electric light that he began to have the feeling that, after all, he must be an actor in something that was very like a dream. Presently, however, her words drove such fancies from him; he realised that he was wide awake enough, and so was she.

"I wonder if you were ever your mother's darling. You look as though you might be some girl's even now, though you are an escaped felon."

As she uttered that ugly word again he winced. She seemed to notice it.

"You don't seem to like being what you are. That sort of thing is so silly! If you're a thief, it's because you choose to be a thief. Why resent being called what you choose to be? Perhaps it surprises you to learn that I know you are a felon, and your unhappiness is because of that—because I can see you are unhappy. How odd! Did you think, when you got out of that carriage window, that you were going to be your own man for ever and evermore? If so, how silly you were. Perhaps it's just a fault of youth."

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He had heard thus far in silence, but now the moment had come in which he felt that he must speak. It was perhaps owing to the fact that his nerves were jumpy that his words seemed rough ones.

"Can't you take that light away from my eyes? Do you think it's fair to blind me with a thing like that, hiding behind it so that I cannot see what kind of a creature you are? Take the light away."

"Presently, my friend, presently; and don't fidget, or I may mistake your intentions and use the gun."

"Use it! I've had enough. I believe that infernal thing of yours has blinded me."

He put up his hand to screen his tortured eyes.

"I thought you cut your hand as you scrambled through the window. I see you did. It seems to be still bleeding."

"How do you know—what do you pretend to know?"

"Nothing could be simpler. I was in the next compartment."

"What do you mean by the next compartment? The next compartment to what?"

He spoke with a savageness which seemed only to amuse her.

"The next compartment to the one which you were in with the policeman. You seem to be unaware that in many of the carriages on French railways there is a pane of glass let into the woodwork

The Woman with the Lamp

on either side, intended to serve both you and your neighbours as a window. There was such a pane in your compartment; didn't you notice it?"

He put down his hands, seeming not to notice the glare of the lamp so much in the force of his sudden astonishment.

"Notice it? Of course I didn't notice it. Do you think if I had noticed it I should——?"

He left his sentence unfinished; she rounded it off for him.

"Of course you wouldn't. I understood that at the time. But then, as I said to myself, how very stupid you must be. How very unobservant. I was in the next compartment. When someone got in at Marseilles I looked through the pane of glass to see who it was. If you had been undesirable neighbours, I should have stretched something across that pane of glass to obscure the view. I was extremely interested in what I saw; it gave me the feeling that I was in for quite a little adventure—I who love adventure. Are you tired of standing?"

"I was tired long ago; but what do you care for that?"

"Not much, that's true; one asks such questions. To continue. I saw a big, broad man, with a square black beard. With him was a younger man—quite a nice-looking young man, beautifully dressed—a light-blue necktie, a pearl-grey suit; one of the dandies one meets on the Terrace at Monte Carlo on a fine afternoon. He got into the compartment first,

Love in Fetters

the black-bearded man close behind, so close that he seemed to have hold of his hand, as if unwilling to let him get too far away. Wondering, I saw that the nice-looking young man had a shining something round his right wrist, and that the bearded man held the other end of it. When the train started I knew it was a steel fetter, because the bearded man made him hold out his left wrist, and slipped the other piece of shining something which he had been holding round it, and, behold! about the young gentleman's wrists were a pair of handcuffs. Then I understood—at least in part. The bearded man was a policeman, an officer of the law, the young gentleman was a felon whom he was taking to justice. That amused me very much."

"You seem to have odd tastes in amusement. If I had only noticed that pane of glass, and known you were on the other side of it!"

"What would you have done if you had? What could you have done, except what you did? Perhaps you might have persuaded your policeman to cover my little window, perhaps not. He did not look as if he were an easy person to persuade, especially by a felon whom he was carrying off to jail. Anyhow, I should have found means of seeing; it is quite easy to make a peep-hole in a railway carriage. You really do look tired. If you like, you may sit down upon the ground. I will permit it."

"Thank you, I would rather stand."

"Then stand. It is a long journey from Mar-

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seilles, and we were not travelling by the fastest train. I went to sleep. I have the faculty of enjoying, when I choose, innocent, profound, restful sleep. I enjoyed it then, with one ear open. You see——” Nearly beside himself with conflicting emotions as he was, he noticed how all at once her tone changed; how she began to drawl, as of set purpose, as if hinting at a meaning which was behind her words. “In this part of the country I have an estate; as the train neared it I had particular reasons for being very wide awake, and I was, when the expected happened. I expected that we might stop just there, and we did.”

She paused. In spite of his preoccupation with his own affairs, he could not help asking himself if she were suggesting that she had had something to do with the wrecking of the train, or had had knowledge of what was about to happen. The idea was such a monstrous one that he could not give it shape and form in a direct question, though he had a notion that the intention of her pause had been to give him a chance; but he wondered. The drawling intonation still marked her voice when she went on.

“It is odd how, in a railway accident, Providence seems to discriminate; how one is left, and another taken; how, in the same wagon, of the several compartments some are telescoped, and some are scarcely injured. I believe mine was the only compartment in that wagon which escaped practically uninjured. Of course, I was shaken; oh yes, I was

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badly shaken. I shall suffer from that shaking for many years to come, perhaps for the whole of the remainder of my life, as the railway company will presently learn. But I kept my presence of mind, which I never yet have lost."

At this point there was a significance in her tone which made him more anxious than ever to learn what sort of woman this was.

"And, having assured myself that I was not totally destroyed, or even helplessly mutilated, my first impulse was to look through the little pane of glass, which, by the way, was broken. You did not see that it was broken?"

"Do you think that I had eyes for such a thing as that? I had not expected what was going to happen."

"Clearly you had not expected what was going to happen—it did not take long to enable me to make sure of that. I found your conduct very amusing."

"Do you mean to say you kept your face glued to that wretched little spy-hole at such a moment as that, that your first thought was not how you were going to escape?"

"You see, the door of your compartment jammed; mine flew wide open. I knew that I had only to choose my moment and there was my way out; so, as I was in no hurry, I amused myself by watching you. I saw you struggling to unlock those inconvenient and tell-tale handcuffs. That was very funny. I could have shown you a better way."

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"Could you? Perhaps you have worn handcuffs yourself; your words seem to suggest it."

"Do not be rude to a lady, and to one you have never seen. One day, perhaps, I will show you a much better way out of a pair of handcuffs than the one you tried. However, that is but a trifle. I saw you take the letter-case out of the dead policeman's pocket, and the other things besides. I saw you climb to the window with those two bags; that was very funny. I could not have done that myself. I suppose you were in such a state of mind that you were not conscious yourself of how fine a thing it was. Then I saw you scramble through the window. I thought you cut yourself against the glass. Soon after you dropped upon the line I dropped too, and I do not think I fell so awkwardly as you did. I followed you up the bank, at a respectful distance. You were so engaged with your own thoughts that I do not think you would have noticed me if I had been closer. I followed you here. When I saw, in my own cowshed, your manner of opening that bag, I felt that the moment had come for me to introduce myself. My name is Madeline de Constal; I am a widow. What is your name?" He hesitated; she interpreting his hesitation in her own way. "You had better be candid, if you can. Come, sir, you should not keep a lady waiting who, after introducing herself, asks for the same courtesy from you."

Still he hesitated. When he answered it was in sullen tones :

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"My name is Dennett."

"And your Christian name? What we in France call your little name? You are not very informing; you seem reluctant to imitate my frankness."

"My Christian name is Robert."

"Robert? Is that so? Robert Dennett? The name is very English, is it not? I, Madeline de Constal, widow, greet you, Monsieur Robert Dennett—may I say bachelor?"

"I am not married."

"No, I thought not, when I beheld you at Monte Carlo."

"You saw me at Monte Carlo?"

"Indeed, and indeed again. That is the funny part. But we will speak about that later. At present, Monsieur Dennett, there are certain little matters of business which we must transact together. That letter-case, the other things, which you took from that dead policeman's pocket; you put them in your own pocket. If you will hand them over I will give them my most careful consideration, Monsieur Robert Dennett."

This was too much; every instinct in the man rebelled. His impulse was to spring at the lamp, extinguish it, then make off in the ensuing darkness. If she tried to stop him—he was a man, she was a woman; he ought to prove the stronger. But if he did succeed in getting away, what good purpose would be served? She had but to move a finger, he would be again a prisoner with the gallows again

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staring him in the face. His only hope of getting even a good run was—to kill her. He had blood to answer for already. And to kill a woman! He had made a dash to Monte Carlo, knowing that retribution would follow hard upon his heels, that he would have to answer for his sin. Never, since leaving London, had he known a moment's peace of mind. Even while ostensibly amusing himself, seeming in the highest spirits, an unseen finger had kept touching him upon the shoulder. How much worse it would be if he had to make such a flight again, with this unseen woman haunting him. He could not do it.

"You appear to know a great deal to my disadvantage. I admit that much of what you have said of me is true."

"That is very good of you, Monsieur Robert Dennett."

"I do not know what use you intend to make of the knowledge you have gained. I cannot understand what kind of person you are, but I beg you to understand this, that what I took from Inspector Jenner's pocket concerns me, and me only; it is no concern of yours. I intend that it shall continue to be no concern of yours."

"Inspector Jenner? So that was the policeman's name. That's a useful piece of information, Monsieur Robert Dennett."

He could have bitten his tongue off. Clearly in the then state of his mind he ought not to trust

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himself to speak. He ought to preserve silence in spite of her. But she made it plain that she was of a different opinion.

"Let me desire you to understand the situation, Monsieur Robert Dennett. You are a criminal escaped from justice. Good. You say that is no concern of mine? You are mistaken. It happens that I have much sympathy with persons in your position, for reasons of my own. If you presume to think that I may have been in a similar situation once upon a time myself, I can only say that it is impossible to keep some men's presumption within bounds. If you give me your confidence, I promise you in return that no policeman shall ever again put a pair of handcuffs round your wrists. If you do not give me your entire confidence—now, here, at once—we are nearer to my house than you perhaps suppose. I have a little whistle; if I blow it, my servants will hear—fine, strong, healthy men—and, if they do hear, you will spend the night—what is left of it—and will greet the rising sun in our local jail. Come, Monsieur Robert Dennett, hand me over what you took from Inspector Jenner's pocket."

CHAPTER IV

DRINKING HER HEALTH

HE handed her the inspector's letter-case. This woman was, in her way, a logician. She did not give him much time to arrange his thoughts, but—he got as far as that. What was the use of his refusing what, sooner or later, she would be in a position to take for herself?

"Throw it to me," she said, when she perceived the case in his fingers. "Just at present I would rather you did not come too close." So he threw it on to a spot from which she could easily pick it up. "Now the other papers." He tossed to her the letters which had kept company with the case. "I think there is still one other paper, if you please."

"You must have kept a very sharp look-out through that window of yours."

If he had intended a gibe, it went unheeded.

"It was a blue paper, that other one, if you will be so good as to let me see it."

"It seems that I have no option; if I had even so much as the ghost of one——"

He tossed her what she wanted. She seemed to have settled the lamp upon her knees. Its glare was not so persistently upon his face. He could make

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out her dim, shadowy form in the darkness behind. She had the blue paper he had surrendered in her two hands; he could see them plainly as they were held in front of the lamp. She was unfolding it with leisurely fingers. Watching was torture. On that paper was the revelation of his shame. What a fool he was not to have torn it up—he had not thought of that. Before she could have stopped him he might have shredded it into atoms, which she would have found it impossible to piece together. He had a mind to snatch it now, to destroy it before she could tell what it was. While he hesitated it was already too late. She had the paper open. When he moved towards her she said :

“I have already requested you, M. Robert Dennett, not to come too close. This gun might fire itself.”

Something was on her frock, between her knees, in front of the lamp. She slightly lifted what he perceived was the muzzle of a revolver. He decided to stay where he was. She began to study the contents of the paper, commenting on it aloud as she did so.

“This is a legal document. I see it is what you in England call a warrant; it is a warrant for the arrest of—Ronald Denton.” He felt, although he could not see them, that her eyes were lifted from the paper. “Who, M. Robert Dennett, is Ronald Denton?”

“I am Ronald Denton—you know that I am Ronald Denton.”

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"Indeed? Is that so? You seem to have more names than one; it is at times convenient. By which am I to call you? I think, in the face of this, it would be more diplomatic, more tactful, more kindly—how shall I put it?—to call you M. Robert Dennett; especially as I see on what a very serious charge Ronald Denton was arrested. I can imagine that you must have spent some very anxious moments in the train with Inspector Jenner considering how grave was the charge on which he was taking you to England. So you are that kind of person; very dangerous! If they had found you guilty—what then? My word! Would they have found you guilty?"

He did not know what was in the warrant; he had never seen such a thing, had no notion how such documents were worded. Inspector Jenner had not read it to him; he had not dropped a hint that the inspector should do anything of the kind. When a hand was laid upon his shoulder as he was coming out of the Casino that afternoon, and a voice said: "Mr. Ronald Denton, I am Inspector Jenner, of Scotland Yard," he understood; he wanted nothing further; he knew that his race was run, and that all was over. The one wish left to him was that he should not be turned into a spectacle, to avoid scandal.

That was arranged; the inspector was as willing as he was. In the ordinary course it would have been necessary to take him before the local court and

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obtain his extradition, a process which would have occupied an indefinite space of time, to speak of nothing else. Prisoner and captor came to a little understanding between themselves.

"If you are willing to surrender," declared the inspector, "and will give me your word not to attempt to escape, I will take you straight away to England. In that way you won't be messed about by the local police, who, I believe, have a way of messing a man about, and you'll avoid all fuss. The point is, will you give me your word of honour that you won't attempt to escape?"

Ronald Denton was ready to give him any assurance he required. The inspector looked him very steadily in the face as he said so, and believed him. The warrant was never referred to. The detective boarded the train with his prisoner that same evening. If the train had not met with disaster on the way, Ronald Denton would certainly have been borne without any fuss to town.

When this woman, with the inspector's warrant between her fingers, spoke, as it seemed to him, with a jeer, of what a dangerous character he was, something seemed to burst within him; words which had been struggling for egress ever since that fatal afternoon, forcing the dam which had held them in, came rushing forth on the head of this unknown woman whom he had never seen.

"I never meant to murder him."

It was like the cry of a frenzied child. After all,

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this was only a very young man, and—inasmuch as he had never known even the shadow of trouble, except in that one wild hour—even younger than his years. There was silence. He was conscious that the woman was observing him. Now that her lamp was not torturing his eyes, he could distinguish objects better; he could dimly make out the patch of white which marked her face in the darkness beyond. Then he guessed that her glance returned to a study of the warrant.

“You did not mean to kill him?”

The dryness of her intonation seemed to sting him.

“I did not—I can prove that I did not. At least, I believe that I can prove it. He said things which drove me mad; when I said things to him he tried to strike me with the telephone—he caught it up from the table to hit me. I snatched it from his hand and hit him with it instead. I suppose I must have hit him harder than I meant—I know I am pretty strong, and I was wild with rage—because he went down in a heap, and when I looked at him he was dead.”

There was another silence, during which he felt that she was dividing her attention between the warrant and him.

“And then you ran away?”

“As you say, I ran away. That’s where I was a fool—an utter fool, the worst kind of fool. If I had stopped and faced the thing I might have

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explained—they might have listened. But I couldn't; I simply couldn't. I had to go—I had to. His—his face was so awful; and now I suppose I shall have to pay for it."

"Your supposition seems sound. As you are aware, most murderers——"

"Don't you call me that! You shan't call me that! If you call me that, I'll make you pay for it, even though you are a woman."

"You mean—you'll murder me? I'm not afraid; you never met a woman better able to protect herself than I am. Still, try it if you choose—if you think it will give you any satisfaction. Between ourselves, I think it would be a mere passage from one folly to another. I intend to use the language I choose, however much you may dislike it. I was about to remark that most murderers—— By your own showing you are a murderer."

"I'm not! I tell you I'm not! I tell you I'd no more idea of killing him than——"

"Than you have of killing me? Well, just now you had what looked very like some idea of the kind. Perhaps you have it still; you look dangerous, Monsieur—perhaps I had better call you Robert Dennett. I say again that I was about to remark that most murderers are willing to protest, by the beards of their fathers, that all that happened was by the purest accident, and that they never meant anything unkind. I have even heard of people being executed, although they declared that it was all the

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fault of the party who was killed. Your tale, M. Robert Dennett, is a little thin. The man who, having done the thing, is willing to pay the penalty, is the kind of man I can understand; the one who whines and snivels, 'Oh, if you please, I really never meant it,' I'd be willing to hang him with my own hands. Are you that sort, M. Robert Dennett? However, what does it matter if you are? I am told that in England they always hang a man who kills another, so they'll hang you, anyway, if they can only get you. Let us look into the rest of Inspector Jenner's belongings."

He saw her fingers open the letter-case.

"So! Here is something pretty! Bank-notes, and quite a lot of them. Now my interest begins. There is something about bank-notes which speaks to my soul. It is like a peep into Paradise. Regard me as your banker, M. Robert Dennett, and draw on me at sight. There are other matters on which I should like to touch, but the hour grows late. I will put Inspector Jenner's bank-notes into my little bag."

He was conscious that she was opening something in the darkness behind the lamp. Presently she spoke again, in her voice a suggestion of laughter.

"Ah! what have we here? The very thing I had forgotten. How stupid one can be. I have not had bite or sup for I do not know how long—I am hungry, and I am thirsty. I do not care to go into a restaurant when I am travelling. I have an old-

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fashioned feeling that for a lady alone it is not quite proper. I like still less the dining-car—the food, the way in which it is cooked, the service, the waiters who should be so clean, and are so dirty—no, not for me. I prefer to take a few mouthfuls in my own bag—the wing of a chicken and a glass of wine, that is enough for me. May I offer you a share of my little repast, M. Robert Dennett? You also must be hungry and thirsty; at least, you will drink a glass of my wine? You know we are in the Burgundy country; over there is Nuits, on this side is Beaune. We are right among the vineyards. Here is a glass of good red wine out of my own private bottle. You can approach near enough to drink it.”

He could see her ungloved hand holding out in the lamplight a glass of wine. It is notorious how, in the hours of great distress, trifles strike us. He noticed how white a hand it seemed to be, and the rings upon the slender fingers. This was no old woman’s hand.

“Why won’t you let me look at you?” he asked. “You have me at a disadvantage. You are not fair; you can see me, while you yourself are hidden.”

“You would like to see me, to know what kind of person I am?”

“I should.”

“Then—you shall. I am in a melting mood; your tale has touched me, M. Robert Dennett. Drink to my health from this glass of wine, and you shall see me afterwards.”

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"You promise?"

"It is not manners to tell a lady that you doubt her. That is not the first time you have done so. However, there may be excuses; I will be lenient. When you have drunk my health you shall see me—that I promise. Only I hope you do not expect too much; that you will not be disappointed. How long have I to hold this glass, M. Robert Dennett? You may approach to take it." He took it from between her fingers. "Drink to the health of Madame de Constal, who will perhaps prove to be your very good friend."

He said nothing. Whether he repeated the toast to himself it was not easy to tell. He raised the glass and drained it of its contents, making exclamation the instant he had done so:

"Good Lord! What infernal stuff is this?"

"Did I not tell you that it was from a little private bottle of my own?"

"I—believe—it's—some—confounded——"

The sentence was not concluded; it seemed to be with difficulty that he got as far as that. He reeled as he spoke; then, his feet seeming to go from under him, he fell to the ground. Where he fell he lay. The woman rose with a laugh.

"When a woman makes a promise she keeps it. Now you can see as much of me as you please."

CHAPTER V

A FAIRY PALACE

WHEN we were introduced to Ronald Denton he had just awakened in a railway carriage, to wonder where he was. When we meet him again he has just come out of a sound slumber to exercise the same sense of wonder. He could not make out where he was. He was certainly not in a train. This was no railway carriage; it seemed to be a very comfortable room. He was lying on a bed which appeared to be all that such an article ought to be.

He raised himself on his elbow. It was a charming room; a lofty ceiling, white cupboards all round the walls; a Persian rug in the centre of a black oak floor, which was polished till it shone like a mirror; inviting arm-chairs, a roomy couch, two tables, and he knew not what besides. What was this place? Where on earth could he be?

He sat up. He felt heavy and stupid; his head was aching. He could not get his thoughts into proper working order; he couldn't understand the thing at all. Where had he been last night? That part came back to him with a shock. The journey with Inspector Jenner, the awakening out of sleep, the interview in the shed. What had been the finale

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to that scene? He had a vague notion that something queer had happened at the end. When he tried to think just what it was, his brain seemed clogged. How the interview had ended; what had happened afterwards; how he came to be where he was—these things he could not remember.

Someone tapped at the door and, without invitation, entered; apparently a manservant, in an alpaca jacket of what struck him as being an odd design. He spoke in French :

“Monsieur would like coffee?”

He addressed him in the carefully modulated tones of the well-trained French servant. Somehow Denton thought how out of keeping the tone was with the man's appearance. Broad-chested, bullet-headed, bull-necked, his hair cropped so close that he seemed almost shaven, he not only suggested unusual strength, but there was something sinister about him altogether. His curiosity more on the alert than ever, Denton asked a question :

“Who are you?”

“I am the valet de chambre; I am Achille.”

“What place is this?”

“This is the house of Madame de Constal, the Château d'Ernan. Monsieur would like coffee?”

“I would like something—yes, coffee.” The man was leaving the room. “Wait a moment.” The man stopped. Denton had it on his tongue to ask how he got there. Perhaps it was something in the man's bearing which prevented the question being

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put. He asked something else instead : "I am rather hungry. Can I have an egg with my coffee?"

The man inclined his head and went. Directly he was gone, Denton said to himself :

"Of all the rascally looking gentlemen ! If Nature writes a clear hand, what a treasure he must be ! Madame de Constal ? Who is Madame de Constal, and what is the Château d'Ernan, and how come I to be here, anyhow ?" He racked his brain. "Madame de Constal ? Wasn't that the name of the woman in the shed, or, anyhow, didn't she say that it was ? If that's so—and I believe she said that was her name—what sort of place is this she has got ? If this is a sample of the rooms, it must be quite a palace ; and how come I to be installed in such an apartment ?"

Achille returned so quickly with a well-covered silver tray that one might be excused for wondering if he had found it outside the door. There was coffee ; there were all sorts of rolls, delicious-looking butter, boiled eggs, various samples of those agreeable confitures which sometimes accompany a French "little breakfast." As Achille put the tray upon a small table, and carried the table to his bedside, Denton thought what an appetising-looking tray it was.

"By the way," he asked, "where are my clothes ? And"—surveying his person he made a discovery—"where on earth did I get these pyjamas ? They are not mine."

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"Monsieur should know better than I." Achille's manner could not have been more suave; not a muscle of his visage moved, yet Denton suspected him of smiling. Achille went on: "As for monsieur's clothes, here is monsieur's dressing-room; monsieur will find everything ready. Monsieur will have a bath—hot or cold?"

Achille, opening a door which Denton had not noticed, revealed on the other side what seemed to be quite a pleasant chamber, in which masculine garments of all sorts were displayed, as if for their owner's inspection. Denton felt confused; this was almost too much. Were those clothes his? How could they be? Yet it was hardly a question which he could discuss with a valet de chambre.

"I'll have a cold bath when I ring. Is there a bell?"

Achille pointed to a small silver bell which was on the tray, and went. Denton, alone, looked about him with bewildered eyes.

"Of all the queer starts, this is the queerest. I suppose I am awake, and that these things aren't happening in a dream. The room seems real enough, and the man seemed real enough, and, by George! there's no mistake about this coffee. It's delicious! But how come I to be in a place like this, in another man's pyjamas? I swear they're not mine, though they fit me uncommonly well; and a dressing-room which seems chock full of clothes which aren't mine any more than these pyjamas,

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though that fellow seems to take it for granted that they are. He seemed to take a good deal for granted. I wonder how much he knows; how much he could tell me if he liked? I'll bet a trifle that he knows more about me than I do about him. But it's rather awkward to have to put questions of a certain sort to a black-visaged ruffian who tells you he is a valet de chambre. I doubt if he'd answer if I put them. I'd better wait till I see where this adventure is leading. This coffee certainly is excellent."

He did justice to the "little breakfast." It refreshed him; it seemed to clear his head, to give him assurance, to make him more of a man. He got out of bed and began to walk about. A pair of quilted, sky-blue slippers were by the bed. He had never worn such things in his life, yet, with a smile, he put them on; they seemed to be in keeping with the room. It was certainly exquisitely appointed; there were all sorts of odds and ends which pointed to both taste and money. Achille had drawn the curtains which hung before a big window which ran almost across one side of the room. It was a casemented window. Opening one of the casements, he leaned out. The view was superb. It seemed that the house stood on a slope; from what he could see of it, it was a huge place, in spacious grounds. The March sun, shining in a cloudless sky, suggested spring. The air was sweet and fresh; it did him good to breathe it into his lungs. He admired, and wondered all the more.

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"What on earth is this place, and how do I come to be in it?"

He went into the dressing-room. It was not large, but it was charming—a dressing-room for a true exquisite. And the clothes which were displayed—and in the cupboards there were more—dozens of pairs of boots, treed, on shelves.

"I might be able to get into another man's coats and trousers, but I doubt if my feet will fit his boots."

At one end of the apartment, screened by a curtain, was a bath, of a kind quite unusual in a French private house.

"Is this a palace seen in Alnaschar's vision? Shall I presently wake up and find myself—goodness alone knows where? There's a trick about it somewhere, that I'll swear. I think I can manage without that fellow's help. I can get my own bath, and without assistance get into another fellow's clothes, or try to."

He bathed and dressed, amused to find that every garment fitted as if it had been made for him, which was not so strange as he supposed. He was of average height, slightly built, a stock figure. He was unaware that he might have gone into the first cheap tailor's shop, to find that the first suit the shopman offered fitted as well as if it had been made for him. What amazed him was that the boots should fit his feet, being ignorant that there are stock sizes in boots, as in clothes. As he surveyed himself in a long mirror, being completely arrayed, he de-

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cided that the result was not so bad; all the things he had on were of excellent quality, made by good craftsmen, for whomever they might have been intended. His toilet completed, he rang the bell. 'Achille appeared.

"I have bathed. As you see, I am dressed. Now, what next?"

Achille's face was inscrutable. "If monsieur will descend," he said.

He held the door open. Ronald Denton passed through.

"If monsieur will permit," explained Achille, "I will lead the way."

Denton permitted. Achille led him through wide corridors to the head of a splendid staircase; then down it. Half-way down, Achille, pausing, drew aside to permit someone to ascend. Ronald Denton, confused, tongue-tied, amazed, beheld a lovely creature coming up the stairs. She just glanced at him as she passed, that was all; then went on. Achille continued to descend. Denton, all agitation, would have liked to ask him who that dream of feminine beauty was, but he refrained—he followed where the other led, across a fine hall, a fire of logs blazing in the great, old-fashioned fireplace, to a doorway screened by silk curtains. He drew the curtains aside, held the door open.

"If monsieur will please to enter."

Monsieur did please. Ronald Denton found himself in an apartment, not of large dimensions,

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panelled in black oak, polished, like the floor in his bedroom, till each panel shone so that one seemed to see into the very heart of the wood.

"This, monsieur," said Achille, "is what here, in the château, we call 'the room of other times.'"

Achille went. Though he was no connoisseur in such matters, Denton, as he glanced about him, understood what the man had meant. Every article the room contained had a history, one felt sure of it; it was so old, and had played a part in so many scenes. In the open fireplace, framed in the panels, blazed another fire of logs. Denton, as if conscious of a sudden sense of chill, warmed his hands at the blaze.

"This certainly must be a palace in Alnaschar's vision."

As he said this to himself the door opened. A lady, entering, approached to where he stood.

"Mr. Robert Dennett, I am Madame de Constal. Welcome to the Château d'Ernan. Now at last I really keep my promise, and you see me. It is not necessary that I should hope that you slept well; I can see it in your face. What a good-looking boy you are."

CHAPTER VI

HIS HOSTESS

WHAT he had expected to see he could not have described; it was not what he actually saw. A woman, above the average height of her sex, full-breasted, though slightly built, a sinuous something in the outlines of her form which not only gave grace to her figure but conveyed a suggestion of suppleness, of quickness, strength, agility. She stood very upright, on the balls of her feet rather than on her heels; her skin, though dark to the verge of sallowness, was clean and healthy; her black hair was dressed in such a fashion that it seemed to bring into relief the nice contours of her shapely head. At her age he could not guess; she might have been, possibly was, past thirty. Whatever the exact tale of her years, she was in her prime; youth, ardour, health, energy, activity—these things were hers; hers, also, was the joy of life for life's own sake.

This was in every sense a strong woman. Ronald Denton would have said, if you had asked him, that he knew as much about women as most men. Young men do say that; but his knowledge was less than

His Hostess

he supposed. He realised, as she stood there on the other side of the fireplace, a smile lighting her velvety eyes, giving a glimpse of her even, white teeth, that this was altogether a new type to him. She was exquisitely dressed, though he could not have said by what means the effect was produced.

He was confused by her appearance, by the manner of her address—she was so clearly poking fun at him. He was at an age at which young men do not care to be laughed at by women. It was clear that she laughed at him.

“You will forgive me, my name is not Dennett; it is Denton.”

She laughed outright, as if at the stiffness of his speech and manner.

“You will forgive me also—I prefer Dennett. There is about that other name a suggestion of what I do not care to talk about.” He flushed at the hint her words conveyed, which seemed to add to her amusement. “You are very English, Mr. Dennett. Has it not struck you as odd that of all people in the world the Englishman is the one whom it is the least possible to mistake? I have often met people who have made me ask myself, ‘To what country do you belong?’ Among them there has never been an Englishman.”

He wondered of what nationality she was. There was in her voice the faintest flavour of a foreign accent. She spoke perfect English. Either his features revealed his thoughts more plainly than he

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supposed, or her perception was unusually keen—she read what was in his mind.

“You ask yourself to what country I belong. It may amuse you, but I can hardly say; I have in me a little of so many countries. Nearly all my relatives have belonged to different nations. It sounds droll put like that, but it is true. My father was a Pole; his mother was a German; her relations came from Spain. My mother was French; she had cousins who were English, with whom I have lived a great deal—you see I speak English pretty well. Her mother was born in South America, and, oddly enough, married a citizen of the United States. Is not all that very droll? The riddle is, to what country do I belong? You, Mr. Dennett, you are so plainly English, and I—I am what?”

Under ordinary circumstances Ronald Denton would have been affected by this woman's face, her humour, the indescribable sense of charm which invested her whole personality, and, since he was not by any means a stupid youth, he would have met what seemed to be her friendly advances at least half-way, and would have proved very quickly that he was not without agreeable qualities of his own. But the circumstances were not ordinary; he was awkward, stupid, tongue-tied, a condition which was not lessened by her laughing comments.

“Are you always so full of conversation, Mr. Dennett? Are you always so quick with a polite

His Hostess

answer? Do you always leave your hostess to say all the pretty things?"

He made an effort to pull himself together, uncomfortably conscious that to this fine lady he must seem an utter fool.

"I'm aware that I'm not the brightest person in the world, and if I seem to you to be even peculiarly stupid, it is because I feel myself to be in such an utterly false position; the fact being, indeed, that I do not even know what my position is. You are so courteous that I hardly like to ask you what it is."

"That is better; you are getting on; a little oil, and maybe the machine will move easily, without so much as a creak. Briefly, Mr. Dennett, your position is that of my guest."

"It is very kind of you to say so, but—I am really afraid that that does not explain much to me. I do not wish to seem over-curious, but how do I come to be in this house at all?"

"Oh, that's very simple. You were carried here."

"Carried here?" She smiled; but he looked serious enough, which seemed to make her smile still more.

"Last night. You see, I had drugged you, which seemed to be the easiest way of getting you here. Do you not remember the glass of wine in which you were to have drunk my health, which you emptied? And after that I should think that you remember no more. That is the position, Mr. Dennett."

"You drugged me? It seems a little hard to

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believe; but I suppose if you say so—you at least are frank."

"Oh, yes, I am always frank. With me it is a rule; candour is such a fine thing. Don't you think so, Mr. Dennett?"

"I have already told you that my name is not Dennett—it is Denton."

"And I have already told you that that is a name I do not like. If you intend to advertise yourself under that objectionable name, then you compel me to tell you that at the Château d'Ernan there is no room for a murderer. You look offended."

"Can you conceive of any man as being pleased to be addressed like that?"

"I have already told you that I am frank; it is my rule. If you are Ronald Denton, you are a murderer. Is that not true? You wince, you change colour, you look angry; frankness does not please you. It is you who are to blame. I know no Ronald Denton; the gentleman I know is Mr. Robert Dennett, whom I am pleased to welcome to the Château d'Ernan as my guest. That, once more, is the position."

"Why should you wish to have me as your guest, such a creature as I am?"

"That is my affair."

"Your affair? You have curious ideas."

"If I have? I await your comment on—shall we say the peculiarity of my idea, if you think it becoming to criticise your hostess. In that suit of

His Hostess

clothes you look very well. Do you know that they are mine?"

"I am uncomfortably conscious that they are not mine. Where is my own bag, if I may put the question?"

"The things that belong to you, and also the things that belonged to Inspector Jenner, are in my keeping, and will continue there. I am sorry that you should be so uncomfortably conscious that those clothes are not your own. When I said that they were mine, I meant in rather a special sense. I have worn them; they were made for me. You look surprised—or is it shocked? More surprising, more shocking things than that happen in the Château d'Ernan. Last night I had you measured. Your measurements are mine. If you will observe closely, and have an eye for such a matter, you will see that it needs but little to make me the figure of a man. Do you not see how slender are my hips? There are times when it suits me to be a man; it is for such occasions that those clothes were made. Do you feel more comfortable in them now than before?"

"I suppose it is no use telling you that I am, or, at any rate, that I was a gentleman, and that a gentleman does not care——"

"To wear a woman's clothes? No, you need not tell me that. You look so red, so cross—it becomes you. There are times when even a gentleman is not asked for what he cares. There are points on which

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your tastes will be consulted while you are my guest ; there are others on which they will not be consulted."

"When you say that I am your guest, do you mean that I am your prisoner?"

"That's as you please. I have here a large house, a fine house, and spacious grounds. You can go in them wherever you please, and when I feel that I can trust you, can go outside them also. If you have ever been in prison, you will know that it is not like that."

"What is your object in keeping me here?"

"I have told you already that is my affair. Rather than be my guest, would you wish me to telegraph to the police, 'Here is your murderer for whom you are looking. Come, take him away and hang him'? There would soon be an end of you that way." There was the sound of a gong. "Think the matter over. It shall be as you please. In the meanwhile, take me in to lunch. The gong announces that it is ready. If your appetite is as good as mine, you are ready also. Let us see if my cook has provided anything you can eat. Your arm, Mr. Dennett. You see to-day I do not mind your coming close. Did you not hear me ask you for your arm?"

He offered it to her, as it seemed to him, willy-nilly—stiffly, as if he would much rather not. As she took it she laughed at him.

"How unhappy you look, as if I were the plague, and by a touch should give it you. There are men—even quite young men—who would consider them-

His Hostess

selves fortunate in having even my arm in theirs. This way, Mr. Dennett; the room in which we are about to lunch is on the other side. Do you not admire my hall? There is nothing finer of its kind in France. Perhaps you are in a mood to admire nothing. If that is so, I challenge you. Presently I will show you something which you will admire."

She said it with a little malicious air, as of defiance. He felt her fingers press his arm. She drew closer.

"Do you not notice how exactly of a height we are? Actually, my shoulder touches yours."

It did; a shiver went over him as, for a moment, her body was pressed against his.

"Why, how you shudder! Am I so dreadful, now that you see me as I am? Here is the room in which we are going to lunch."

They entered an apartment in which the table was laid for a meal. Two persons stood side by side looking out of a window, turning as they entered.

"Alice, permit me to introduce to you a new acquaintance, who I hope will become an old friend—Mr. Robert Dennett. Mr. Dennett, it delights me to give you the pleasure of knowing Miss Hudson."

He was conscious that the vision he had encountered on the stairs was coming towards him across the room. He had not supposed himself to be an enthusiastic person—young men are fond of thinking that for them the age of enthusiasm is gone; but he had not thought there was anything so beautiful in

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the world. She stopped at a little distance from him, looking at him with smiling eyes.

"When I am introduced to an Englishman I never know whether or not to shake hands."

"You can shake hands with Mr. Dennett. I feel sure he will not mind."

"Then—if you really won't mind, Mr. Dennett, I think I will." She not only shook hands, she allowed her hand to rest in his for several seconds. He did not seem to mind that either. "I met you on the stairs. I suppose you arrived with Madame quite late last night?"

"Yes. What a quick-witted child you are! Mr. Dennett did arrive with me quite late last night, and this morning he is in a mood in which he can admire nothing. I wish you'd find him something he could admire."

"There are lots and lots of things about Ernán which he can't help admiring."

"Never mind about the lots and lots; it will be something if he can find one. This, Mr. Dennett, is my very dear—I hope he won't mind my saying, my old friend, Monsieur le Comte de Girodet—Bébé. Monsieur de Girodet is so old a friend that for many years he has been to me, Bébé—this is Mr. Dennett, of whom I spoke to you. Be to him as nice as you can. He is a young English gentleman, alone in a foreign land."

Ronald found himself confronting a personage who might have been any age; it was evident that

His Hostess

such extreme pains had been taken to preserve for him the appearance of youth. He beamed at Ronald through an eyeglass.

"Madame de Constal speaks very good English. I understand what she says; I needs must; but I—I am so French that I beg you will allow me to speak my own language."

For the first time a faint shadow of a smile seemed to flicker across the young man's face. He acknowledged the introduction in fluent French.

"I have no doubt that your English is better than my French; but as it happens that I have lived in France a good deal, off and on, I dare say we shall manage to understand each other."

"There is no one in the world, I give you my word of honour, whom it is easier to understand than your humble servant."

Denton wondered. He had a fair idea of his own powers of judgment; yet he doubted if he would be able to understand this wigged and powdered gentleman as easily as his words suggested.

When they had taken their seats at table he found himself with Madame de Constal on one side, who, for reasons which were not difficult to follow, made him feel more awkward than he had ever done since he had left the days of hobbledehoyhood behind, and on the other a young girl who, for causes which were slightly more remote, completed the work of mental paralysis which the elder lady had begun. Although in general his courage did not fail him

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where women were concerned, he hardly dared to look at her. The simplest question which she put to him seemed to make him tremble.

"Do you know Ernán? Have you ever been in this part of the world before?"

Perhaps it was because he looked so awkward, so nonplussed, that Madame de Constal answered for him.

"I think, Alice, that Mr. Dennett never has been in what you call this part of the world before; but he is going to stay here a long time now that at last he has come."

CHAPTER VII

ALICE HUDSON

THAT was the most singular meal of which Ronald Denton had ever partaken. The strangeness was not in the meal itself; the food, the wines, the service—these things were excellent. The entire *déjeuner*, simple though it was, would have struck an epicure as the creation of an artist. The point was that everything was extraordinary about that luncheon except the meal itself. Four more curiously assorted people never sat down together under more curious conditions.

The young man knew that his hostess could have hanged him, but about her he knew nothing at all. Who she was, how she came to be in this fine place, the apparently wealthy mistress of a great establishment; above all, what possible reason she could have to endure his presence under her roof for a single instant; that she could not only permit him to take a seat at her own table, almost, it seemed, as an honoured guest, and introduce him as if he were a decent creature to this lovely girl who, he was convinced, was as high bred as she was innocent, that surpassed his understanding altogether. The

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Comte de Girodet—he could understand how a woman who could permit herself to share his company could suffer Bébé—she continually called him Bébé—but this girl, how she came to be in such a galley was beyond his comprehension.

When the meal was over a suggestion from his hostess made his amazement greater :

“Don’t you think, Alice, since Mr. Dennett is new to Ernan, if you have nothing very pressing to occupy your time, that you could give him some idea of what sort of place it is?”

Before he had recovered from his surprise he found himself passing through an open French window with the girl at his side. What he was to say to her, or even how he was to bear himself, he had not a notion. Had this been one of the light-hearted young ladies of the world in which he had been used to move, about whose capacity to take care of themselves at every point there could not be the faintest doubt, he would have been more at ease; but there was something about this girl which affected him as nothing had ever done before—he was so hideously conscious of his unworthiness to be her companion. How she would have shrunk away and fled if she had had but an inkling of the truth! He was such a dastard that he could permit her to suffer him on false pretences.

They walked some little distance without a word being said by either. She had chattered at the table, but now that they were alone together she was appar-

Alice Hudson

ently as constrained as he. If she were as sensitive as she seemed, she was perfectly well aware how ill at ease he was, and the consciousness affected her. As it seemed that she would not speak, he had to open the ball. He could think of nothing except to ask a question.

"Have you been here long?"

"Four months, three weeks, five days."

The precision of the answer took him aback; he glanced at her to see if she were smiling; she seemed grave enough.

"That is quite a time. Is Madame de Constal a relative of yours?"

"No, none whatever." Again the answer was so precise that he wondered if it was meant for a hint that conversation was not required. Then all at once she put a question: "Is Madame de Constal a relative of yours?"

"I never saw her in my life until last night."

"Indeed?" She glanced at him; then walked on in silence. He wondered if she was considering the oddity of his words and manner. Then all at once she said: "I also never saw her till I met her in her own house."

She stopped again. He was suddenly conscious of a very curious suspicion. Was it possible that she was acquainted with the circumstances under which he was there? Was she about to hint that her position was the same? It seemed incredible; yet such incredible things had happened. He waited

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with what almost amounted to trepidation for her to go on.

"Madame Renaldi brought me here." She paused, as if for him to speak; but he was silent. "Mine is rather a strange story, Mr. Dennett. Sometimes when I look about me and think, I have to pinch myself to make sure that I am not dreaming."

"There are some strange stories in the world."

"Very few so strange as mine." She spoke with such an air of finality, which goes with extreme youth, that, almost before he knew it, he had blurted out a question, to apologise for it the moment it was asked.

"How old are you? I beg your pardon; of course I ought not to have asked, but—I don't know what it was that made me."

"I don't mind your asking in the least, and I don't mind telling you. I am eighteen next week. How old are you?"

The tit for tat was spoken with such an air of unconscious innocence that it startled him.

"I'm afraid I'm twenty-six."

"You don't look it; I shouldn't have thought you were more than twenty-one."

Her eyes were attentively considering his face. That was not the first time that had been said to him; he had been told by feminine persons of all ages that he only looked a boy; he felt very unlike a boy just then. Life was all behind him, literally.

Alice Hudson

"I feel as if I were two hundred and sixty."

"That's very old; fancy if one were two hundred and sixty! I feel ages more than eighteen, but I don't think I feel quite as old as you feel."

"Pray God you never may."

"How earnestly you say it. One would think that you had the most dreadful reasons for feeling old. It's different with me; I really have got reasons."

"And you take it for granted that I haven't? That's funny."

"My father was drowned at sea; my mother never was strong. Soon after they brought the news to her she died; I was left in the world with nothing but the clothes I stood up in. We were at a boarding-house. We lived on an allowance which my father made my mother. He was a captain in the merchant service. His money was due monthly—each month my mother had her cheque. For more than three months no cheque had come. My mother got into debt, the boarding-house bill was left unpaid. When, instead of the cheque, news came of his death, they turned us out. My mother found a room in the Rue des Œufs—a dreadful room in a dreadful street. Not much more than a week after we got there she was dead. We had had no money with which to buy food; I am sure that was not good for her. I had not a penny. My mother had not paid the rent of the room; she had induced them to let her have it on credit. In the same house there

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was a Madame Renaldi. She came and talked to me; at first I did not like her, she asked such funny questions. Then all at once she changed; she told me how sorry she was for me. She said that she would take me to a friend of hers, who would give me a comfortable home, and make me happy until I had decided what to do."

The speaker paused as if to consider. When she spoke again it was in lowered tones.

"At first I did not want to go with her. I was afraid. But there was nothing else for me to do, except—well, there was nothing else. So I said I would go with her, and I went; and she brought me here, and I've been here ever since. Don't you think mine is a very strange story?"

"How did Madame de Constal receive you when you came?"

"That was almost the strangest part. She did not ask a single question. She said that Madame Renaldi had told her all; she said that I was to feel that I was at home, and she's been most wonderful to me ever since."

"Asking nothing in return, hinting at nothing?"

"What could she ask in return—what could she hint at, knowing how I was placed? She's been to me like the fairy godmother in a story, and this has been a fairy palace. She has given me the most beautiful clothes, even jewels, and everything I could desire."

"Everything?"

Alice Hudson

"Yes, I think everything. Why do you say 'everything' like that?"

"One's desires are apt to range over so wide a field."

"That's true." The girl sighed, as if unknowingly. "Sometimes one does want such funny, such silly things; because it is silly to want things one knows one cannot get. I don't know why I've told you my story. I've never breathed a word about it to anyone else, and some of the people who have been here have been frightfully curious, both the men and the women."

"Visitors do come to the house?"

Her eyes opened wider. "Come to the house—visitors? Why, I have told Madeline that she might as well keep an hotel. Sometimes every corner of the place is full of them for days together."

"What sort of people are they who come?"

"All sorts. You're one sort." This with a roguish glance.

"I sincerely trust that no one else comes to the place who is in the least like me."

When after an interval of silence she spoke again, her words surprised him almost more than anything which had gone before.

"I think that's one reason why I told you my story; you are so different from anyone else who has been here. You mustn't laugh at me, but do you know, although you do look such a boy, there's a look in your eyes which made me feel that I had to

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tell you that you are not the only person in the world who has known what it is to be unhappy. As I sat at lunch, I'm afraid I watched you more than I ought to have done, and something kept coming into your eyes—you will have to laugh at me, because I am so silly—which sometimes, as I saw it, made me feel as if I should like to cry. So now you know what a very lumbering excuse I must beg you to accept for having told you my very silly little story."

After she had ceased there was an interval of silence; then, with averted face, he asked:

"Has Madame de Constal been saying anything to you about me?"

"Not a word; I did not know you were in the house until I met you on the stairs, and then again at lunch." After a pause: "Has she been a friend in need to you, as she was to me?"

"My acquaintance with her is so recent that that, I am afraid, is a question which I cannot answer."

The bitterness of his tone seemed to convey a hint to her. They had arrived at the end of a terrace from which they looked out over a wide expanse of country. She stopped to call his attention to it.

"Isn't it pretty from here? They call this the 'point of view.' I don't know how many miles you can see, but M. Perret said it would take you all day in a motor-car just to make a sort of line round it. I don't know how many kilometres an hour he does in his car, but it's something tremendous."

Alice Hudson

"Who is M. Perret?"

"M. Perret?" She repeated the name with an air of introspection. "Oh, he's M. Perret."

"A friend of the house?"

"He's a friend of Madeline's. You mustn't ask me about M. Perret; you see, I don't like him." There was a parapet of plaster at the end of the terrace. He seated himself on it; she was stroking the top with her hand. He noticed what a delicate hand it was, so white, so slender; not the hand of a strong woman. "The fact is, M. Perret is to me like the fly in the ointment. You know, he's one of the things which make me sometimes wish that I could leave Ernan." A smile parted her lips. "And—Madame Lamotte is another."

"And who is Madame Lamotte? Another friend of the house?"

"Madame Lamotte—well, I call her—— You won't give me away?"

"Do you think it's likely? I promise to preserve inviolate silence."

"As a matter of fact, I don't care much if you do or don't—I've told Madeline to her face. I call Madame Lamotte the jailer."

"Indeed. Is she an inmate of the house?"

"She is, and she isn't; sometimes she's here for weeks together, and when she isn't I feel that she's not far off. You see"—stopping, she eyed him steadily, as if reflectively—"I wonder what it is which makes me talk to you like this, when you're such an

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entire stranger? Do you think it's because I feel that I can trust you?"

"I hope so. I don't know that I'm a very trustworthy person sometimes, but I should very much like to know that I am worthy of your confidence, and that you feel I am."

"I do. I think it must be that which makes me speak to you as if—oh, as if I knew you. I've never felt in the least like that with anybody else who has been here, and—and it's been a little trying, because I've been sometimes in what seemed to be rather difficult places, and I've felt that if there were only someone to whom I could say just what I thought, it would be such a comfort. Because, you see, although I hope I'm grateful to Madeline, and realise that if it had not been for her—I dare not even think what might have become of me, and am perfectly conscious that my life here, in many respects, is perfectly ideal—I never knew what real luxury was till I came here; still, there are drawbacks, even to the Château d'Ernan, and one of them is—I don't quite know how to put it—the sort of feeling that one's in prison."

He thought of what his hostess had said to him about its being desirable that he should confine his perambulations to the castle grounds.

"In what sense do you mean that it's like a prison?"

"Well, they won't let you go out; that's one thing. Perhaps it isn't fair to compare it to a prison,

Alice Hudson

but it is like a boarding-school. Madeline doesn't like you to go out of bounds; in fact, she won't have it, and Madame Lamotte sees that you don't. I've never been out of the grounds by myself once since I've been here, and never, on foot, with anyone else; several times in motor-cars with other people, but that's not the same thing. Once I—I was very cross with M. Perret, and I wanted to leave the château. I told Madeline. She was very sympathetic, but she wouldn't let me."

"You're not suggesting that she would try to keep you here against your will?"

The girl considered for several seconds, as if endeavouring to find words in which to express herself exactly.

"That's exactly what I've asked myself. I'm pretty sure she'd try to. I've hinted that I should like to go out into the world to try to do something for myself—to earn my own living, because, after all, I'm only an object of charity, the recipient of Madeline's bounty; and while, as I said, I'm perfectly conscious of her extraordinary kindness, still one doesn't want to be a sort of lap-dog all one's life."

"So I should imagine. Still, you puzzle me. If you really and truly wish to go, and were to say so right out, so that there could be no mistake about it, what possible reason could she have for wanting to detain you?"

"That's what I wonder. I can't think. Of course, it's awfully good of her to receive me here

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at all; but, oh, if you only knew how I sometimes wish I were a nursery governess in England earning twelve pounds a year. There's another thing—she won't let me post any letters."

"You don't mean it? Has she told you so?"

"Once my mother went with my father on one of his voyages, and while they were away they left me in a boarding-school at St. Leonards. It was kept by a Mrs. Marshall. She had a daughter—Adelaide. Adelaide and I became quite friends. She helped her mother in the school, and she used to say that if ever I was on my beam ends—that was how she used to put it—I should come and help her, too."

The girl hesitated, as if she found it rather difficult to continue.

"After I had been here some little time, and M. Perret began to worry, I wrote to Adelaide and told her how things were with me. When no answer came I wrote again; and, when still I heard nothing, I told Madeline how funny it was. And then she said, quite calmly, that the Château d'Ernan was a little kingdom in itself—that it knew nothing about post-offices, and that the letter-box which is kept in the hall is but a blind and a snare, because nothing put in it ever goes anywhere at all. Then she went and took out of a drawer in her writing-table my own two letters, showed them to me, and before I could say a word—I was so amazed—she tore them in two and threw them on the fire."

"That was very cool of her."

Alice Hudson

"Oh, she was cool. I told you she was cool—she always is; and she was sweeter to me than ever. She gave me a string of pearls, and for days and days she simply overwhelmed me with kindness—the sort of kindness I didn't want. I don't wish to be horrid, but it was."

"Can't you think of any possible reason which might induce this lady to keep you here, and cut you off from communication with the outer world?"

"I cannot; I've tried and tried, but I simply cannot. She knows nothing about me, she knows nothing about any of my friends, she doesn't even know for certain that my name is Alice Hudson; all she does know is that I'm a penniless pauper. Why she should not only allow me to be her guest—and I must cost her a tremendous lot of money—but should actually insist upon my continuing to enjoy her hospitality, I have tried over and over again to think what reason she can possibly have, and I can't find even the shadow of one. And I don't know what you'll think of me, but I simply must empty my heart to somebody—and for your sins it's got to be you."

"If my sins never received any severer punishment, what a lucky brute I should be."

"Let's hope they won't, because it must be pretty bad to have to listen to a lot of talky talky from a chit of a girl you've never seen before, and quite probably never want to see again."

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"Thank you. Go on; any more in the same strain?"

"No, that strain's finished. But, seriously—you may laugh, but it's very serious to me—the strangest part of it is that M. Perret should want to marry me."

"Does he? It does seem incredible. I can't conceive any reason for his wanting to do that."

"I cannot—who could? And yet, oh, I'm ashamed to say how many times he's asked me to be his wife. And he doesn't always ask me nicely, either. It was bad enough at first, when he tried to be sentimental, but it was much worse when, afterwards, he actually began to threaten me, and once there was a dreadful scene. He called me all sorts of unpleasant things, and told me, right out, that my wishes in the matter were of no consequence to him, and that I should have to be his wife whether I liked it or not. I was not only half beside myself with rage, but he frightened me out of my wits. When he was angry he seemed so terrible. He wanted to kiss me—I don't know what would have happened if Madame de Constal had not come and found me struggling in his arms. I don't know what she said to him, but he has not been here since."

"I should think not. What kind of a person is this gentleman to look at?"

"I can't describe him, and I'd rather not talk about him at all, only—he does want to marry me, and I can't imagine why; nor can I conceive why Madeline is so anxious that he should."

Alice Hudson

"Madame de Constal is on his side?"

"She is. That does seem strange to me; doesn't it to you? Especially as, at some time or other, I imagine, she was fond of him herself, or else he was very fond of her. Yet once she was in my bedroom till quite late in the morning, pointing out what a desirable match it would be for me, in all respects, and doing her best to persuade me to become that dreadful creature's wife. She even said that she looked upon me as a daughter, and that, in France, it is the mother who chooses a husband for her girl, and that, considering my position, and our relations towards each other, she deemed herself in the position to speak as a mother, and to command me to marry M. Perret. Then I told her, as plainly as I could, that I wouldn't, and I couldn't—got her to understand that I meant it; and she was so cross with me that, for a second or two, I was afraid of what might be coming. But Madeline has the most wonderful control over her temper. I suspected it before; I knew it then. When I was expecting her to blaze out, she just said a few words to me which—which hurt, and then she went away. Now that M. Perret should want to marry me is curious, but that Madeline should seem to be as anxious about it as he is, sometimes that frightens me."

"Is this M. Perret a rich man?"

"He pretends to be, and Madeline says he is. He has always posed as a rich man to me. It was my refusal to accept his costly gifts which was the be-

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ginning of the trouble. If he were the richest man on earth, you understand, it would make no difference to me; and yet, in spite of what he pretends, and of what Madeline says, he doesn't strike me as a really rich man somehow."

There was something so naïve about the girl's words and manner, that, in spite of himself, Denton smiled.

"All rich men don't strike one as being rich, you know. One of the richest men I ever knew struck me as being very like a pauper. It was only after he was dead that anybody ever guessed that he was rich."

"I dare say. Of course, I know millionaires always ride in penny 'buses—at least, so my father used to say. But once I heard Achille using the most terrible language to M. Perret. He called him the most awful names. He threatened him with the most dreadful things. I was so terrified that I didn't dare to let them know that I could hear every word they said. Now, I don't think that any really rich man would have ever allowed Achille to talk to him like that. There's something queer about M. Perret. I always have felt sure of it; that's one reason why I—why I never could bear him to come near me."

"From your story I should also say that there was something queer about Achille. Isn't that the valet de chambre? The man who brought me my coffee said his name was Achille; he waited at table."

"He does wait at table, and he does call himself

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a valet de chambre; but the truth is, that in some respects this is a very queer house, and that's why I am sometimes so afraid. Do you know," she dropped her voice, looking round as if fearful of being heard by the vacant air, "granting that Madeline is the mistress of the château, there have been times when I've wondered if Achille were the master. Hush! here comes Madame Lamotte. I thought we should see her before very long."

A feminine figure was advancing towards them along the terrace.

"She looks as if she were a muscular sort of person."

"She once told me that if I were a naughty girl she would have to pick me up, pack me under her arm, and carry me to bed; and, I suppose just by way of showing me she could do it, she caught me up, then and there, and with her two great hands squeezing the life out of me, I not only couldn't struggle, I couldn't even scream."

"What a delightful person she must be; she must be close upon six feet."

The new-comer was a tall, ungainly creature, whose limbs, though her stature was so great, all seemed to be too big for her. She had a square, cadaverous-looking face, with hollow cheeks. She came up to them with a smile which seemed to suggest a physical effort.

"My dear Alice, how well you are looking! The fresh air has done you good. You English are so

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fond of the fresh air ; it always seems to do you good. Will you not introduce to me this gentleman ? ”

The ceremony of introduction was performed rather perfunctorily. There was no smile of welcome on the young lady's face. Mme. Lamotte seemed to make an effort to make up for the other's lack of geniality.

“ I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Dennett, especially as I think you and I have met before.” Denton glanced quickly at the grim-faced woman. “ You do not recognise me ? No, I think not. Although I noticed you, it does not follow that you noticed me. It was an occasion on which your attention was very much occupied. It was at Monte Carlo, in the rooms. You had the maximum on the red, and you won. There was a young lady standing by you ; she had a red ribbon in her dress ; she touched it with her finger, and she said : ‘ Didn't I tell you ? ’ and she laughed. Do you not remember that afternoon, Mr. Dennett ? ”

He remembered it very well. He wondered if this woman knew what good cause he had to remember it. There was something in her eyes which filled him with a sudden, perhaps unreasonable, dislike.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SAFE RETREAT

THE more Ronald thought, the less he liked his position. What sort of place was this, in which he was to all intents and purposes, in a prison? What possible object could this woman, this Mme. de Constal, as she called herself, have in keeping him at her house—that she should have resorted to such means to get him there? Of course she had robbed him; he could not be quite certain, but thinking the matter carefully out left him with a strong impression that he must have had rather over than under thirty thousand francs when Inspector Jenner had arrested him that afternoon. He had won at the tables; how much, exactly, he could not say; he would not wonder if in one way and another he had had in his possession the equivalent of nearly two thousand pounds in English money. Then he had some very valuable trinkets; for one black pearl scarfpin alone he had given a hundred and fifty pounds. Inspector Jenner had had money. The French notes in the letter-case might have been the inspector's—he was not sure. In that case the inspector might have had possibly a further two hundred pounds. Since this woman had kept everything, including even his

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watch and chain, she must, from that point of view alone, have made an excellent haul. How he was going to get any of his property back from her he was unable to see. He had no doubt that if put to the question she would refuse point-blank to let him have even a pocket-handkerchief which was his own. And how was he to make her? It was easy enough to say that she was a woman, and he a man; but not only had she proved as well able to take care of herself as any man of his acquaintance, but there were, for all he knew, a dozen men about the place in whose hands he would be more helpless than a child. He was vigorous, active, and healthy enough, but an athlete, or a strong man, in the modern sense, he certainly was not. He had no doubt that Achille could make short work of him single-handed. No one could have been more deferential than the valet de chambre—the young man had an uncomfortable feeling that he would continue to be deferential while choking the life out of him.

No, the more he reflected, the less agreeable his position seemed to be. They had two thousand pounds of his money, if not more. For that sum they could give him excellent board and lodging for an indefinite time, and yet make a good profit. In such a household one person more or less would make no appreciable difference to the daily expenses. They might have all sorts of plans for his future disposal—he used the plural pronoun because he shared the girl's belief that Mme. de Constal might very easily

The Safe Retreat

be only the nominal head of the household; in the interim he was well worth keeping, if only as a paying guest. For all he knew—he had never glanced at an English paper since that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon—there might be a price on his head in England; they might be holding him for ransom. Possibly the price might be raised, if diplomatic pressure were brought to bear; he knew nothing about such things. They might be proposing to take his belongings first, and to sell him afterwards, and so make a profit both ways.

Most emphatically he disliked the outlook; yet he realised that the only chance he had of improving it was to wait and watch his opportunity. There might be alleviations by the way. This girl—this Alice Hudson—she very certainly might prove to be one. He was convinced, with the cocksureness of youth, that to speak of love at first sight was anyhow absurd, while in his case, of course, it was much worse than absurd. Yet, from the moment in which he had first seen her on the stairs, it was odd how continually she had been with him. He had distinctly no desire to continue to be an inmate of the Château d'Ernan, but if the gates had been thrown wide open, all his belongings returned to him, and he had been told that he was free and need fear nothing, he would have been reluctant to go, leaving her behind.

What was the mystery about her? Why was Alice Hudson also treated like a prisoner? In part it was comprehensible enough, but much was beyond

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him. He had no opinion either of the Château d'Ernan, or of its inmates; he could easily understand how to such a place as he believed it to be a young, beautiful, friendless, helpless girl would be a distinctly valuable piece of property. She might be used as a lure with which to bait the trap. That was obvious enough. What was not so obvious was the meaning of the story she told of M. Perret and his advances.

What manner of man M. Perret was he thought it possible that he would presently learn; in the meanwhile he ventured a guess. Supposing his guess to be right, or even nearly right, why such a man should wish to make such a girl his wife—that was a problem which required solution. Why Mme. de Constal should put out all her powers of persuasion to induce the girl to consent—that made the problem still knottier. What use did this delightful pair propose to make of the girl when she had been forced to become Madame Perret? That they did propose to make use of her—probably some unworthy, even dreadful, use, some use which they were unable to make while she remained Alice Hudson—he was assured. What could it possibly be? He shuddered at some of the solutions which occurred to him.

He had been some days at the Château d'Ernan when he arrived at one conclusion—that if his stay were prolonged, the consequences might be dangerous both to him and to her, especially to her. Whether by accident, or intention, he and she were continually

The Safe Retreat

thrown together. Mme. de Constal seemed to have occupations which engrossed the greater part of her time; the Comte de Girodet, who seemed to have his head-quarters at the château, would go away in the daytime, and sometimes be away all night. Of Mme. Lamotte only occasional glimpses were seen.

He and the girl were practically dependent on each other for society. Not that that was disagreeable, at least to him. Horrible though his position really was, as he was perfectly well aware, he would yet have been constrained to admit that, in a sense, he had seldom been happier.

The hours which he spent with Alice began to hold for him a something of which he had never dreamed. The mere sound of her voice was music to his ears; every movement she made was to him a pleasure; her *naïveté*, simplicity, the candour born of these, an unfeigning delight.

The grounds were much larger than he had at first supposed. Mme. de Constal would have it that she was the owner of nearly a thousand English acres. He doubted if there were so many as that, but it certainly was a fine domain. And since Alice and he were at liberty to wander about it as they pleased, their prison, at least, was not a narrow one.

"You may be sure," she told him more than once, "that wherever we go we are watched, and that if not quite everything we say is heard, at least everything we do is seen. If we walked beyond certain well-defined limits—although I don't know what they

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are; I know they're there—you'd find that Mme. Lamotte would suddenly appear, or Edouard, the gardien—he's supposed to be a sort of gamekeeper, as far as I can make out—or Phillippe Durand, the gardener, or someone else, and we should be politely informed that Madame's property went no farther, and since if we moved another step we should be trespassing, we had better return the way we came."

"Is there no wall, or fence, or anything, to show how far her property extends?"

"Rather; I showed you the wall on one side the other day, with the chevaux de frise on the top. Then on that side there is an iron fence which is as tall as I am, with sharp spikes on the top, and where there's nothing very prominent there's barbed wire and other pretty things, which you are on to before you know it. But the truth is that they never let you get as far as the boundaries; they stop you before you get there."

He thought that was very possible. Some day, when he was all alone, he proposed to make certain investigations on his own account. When he was with her, having no wish to be intruded on by third parties, he was careful not to go too far afield, and still there were several nooks and corners with which she was acquainted, and to which she led him, where, so far as he could discover, they were entirely alone, and which were as pleasant as any reasonable person might desire.

March that year was, at any rate in that part of

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the world, a not ungenial month. It was good to be out of doors. If the wind sometimes assumed the dimensions of a gale, and not a very warm one, the skies were often blue, and, since the sun shone, all that was needed was a little shelter from the breeze—by two persons whose united ages did not much exceed forty, little more was required.

There was one spot in particular which the lady called "the Safe Retreat."

"One day," she told him, "M. Perret was particularly trying. We had been walking about, or—because that is what it generally amounted to—standing about, till I could endure it no longer, so I ran away. He ran after me, until I came upon a belt of trees, and I dashed into it, and there was a little path which descended, and I went down it; and when I reached the bottom I stood still, and oh, I was afraid, because I was at the bottom of a sort of little dell, with the banks sliding steeply all round, so that it was not easy to get up any way but by the path I had come down, so that if he followed he had me in a sort of trap, and I should only have myself to blame. He might even think I had led him there on purpose—he was that kind of man; he never would believe that I really wanted to have nothing to do with him. I declare I thought I could hear my own heart beating as I stood and waited. He never found the little path, so I call it 'the Safe Retreat.' I've been here lots of times since, but always alone, so that I have come to look upon it as my own particular

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domain. Now I've introduced you to it for the first time, don't you think it's rather jolly?"

He admitted that it was. He would like to have gone farther, and to assure her that it was an ideal spot, a veritable "safe retreat" for a young man and a maiden, but when they were alone together he always made it a point to keep clear of any allusions of the kind. He tried to keep the conversation upon practical, commonplace, and unromantic lines, though sometimes she made it pretty difficult.

She had a way of saying things which made him quiver from top to toe, nor was the quivering less because he was quite sure that she was unconscious of having said anything to induce it. One of those observations came from her lips that afternoon, as, indeed, on most afternoons, to his confusion, they had a trick of doing.

"Isn't it rather singular that I should have brought you here, and that I should have wanted to bring you?—because I told myself that I never would bring anyone to 'the Safe Retreat,' that it should always be just mine, and mine alone—a place where I could get away from everything. And now, in spite of saying all that sort of thing, I've brought you. I wonder why?"

He seemed to find the question rather a difficult one to answer. Nor was the difficulty lessened by what she presently added.

"Do you know, you've made a great difference to the Château d'Ernan, so far as I'm concerned?

The Safe Retreat

Before you came, I was making up my mind that I'd get away from it somehow, and that nothing they could do should stop me. And now, since you've come, I haven't felt as if I wanted to get away in the very least. Isn't it odd that one should change so suddenly? My mother used to say that it isn't the place which counts, it's the people in it—the people you meet there. Do you think that really is the case?"

One may doubt if it was because he was unable to answer that no answer came.



CHAPTER IX

A TUMULT IN THE NIGHT

RONALD DENTON had become quite an established inmate of the Château d'Ernan when there occurred the affair of the troubled night. The days passed so quickly that he forgot to keep count of them as they went, yet it was strange how little varied were his occupations. The first breakfast in his bedroom, a stroll with Miss Hudson in the grounds, or a tête-à-tête with her in the house; luncheon, at which, for the first time, he would meet his hostess, and whoever else might chance to be staying in the house, a long afternoon with Miss Hudson; tea, then more Miss Hudson; dinner, perhaps cards, perhaps music—Mme. de Constal both played and sang so well, and had such an extensive repertoire, that her guests were content to listen to her without showing any signs of being tired, for as long as she chose to perform. Once when Ronald asked her who had been her master, she replied, with that provoking little smile of hers, which made one feel that her words were not to be literally translated :

“I have had many masters in my time for all sorts of things. All sorts of famous people have

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done their best to bring my talents to perfection. Do you think they have succeeded?"

"I feel sure you would have made a great success if you had come out professionally."

"If? There is no if. It is not so very long ago since I was singing to—judging from the noise they made—delighted crowds in most of the great cities of the world. I think that I might draw an audience still; don't you think so, Bébé?"

M. de Girodet happened to be present. As he was wont to do, he was playing with a little pack of cards at a table in the centre of the room. It was odd how he was continually playing with a pack of cards, which he would keep shuffling and re-shuffling, as if he were a conjurer practising his tricks.

"Not a doubt of it. The opera would be crammed to the roof if you proposed to sing there to-night."

She looked at him, and he at her. There was a meaning in their glances which was private to themselves. She laughed.

"I shouldn't be surprised if I did prove to be rather an attraction at the opera if I were allowed to appear."

They would sometimes play bridge. The count, Madame, Miss Hudson, and Ronald. The young folks were partners. The fashion in which they continually lost became quite a standing joke.

"We always win, always," laughed Madame, as for the second time in two rubbers she and her partner made a Grand Slam. "It is not only, I think,

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that our play is a little better than yours. Alice, at least, does not pretend to be strong, but we do hold such cards."

Ronald admitted it. They were playing for love; since neither he nor Miss Hudson had money, what else could they do? Had they been playing even for small stakes their losses would have been appreciable.

"You can always back Béb ," Madame continued, "when he is playing cards. They say bridge is a game of perception; his sense of perception is truly strange. If he foresees that the next time he is dealer he will hold three aces, or, if he does not, that his partner will, it is extraordinary how often his foresight is justified by facts."

When cards were finished, or music, there would be more Miss Hudson. Madame would wander off somewhere, the count would disappear, the young ones would be left to amuse each other; the strange thing was how easily they did it. Each night, when Ronald entered his bedroom, the shadow of the girl seemed to go with him, to lend to it an air of sanctity.

One night he awoke suddenly out of a dream of her—a dream from which he had been reluctant to awake. For an instant or two he wondered what had made him wake, and then became conscious that somewhere, as it seemed, just under his window, was the noise of a motor-car. Motors were not unfamiliar at the Ch teau d'Ernan. The count seemed to have

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one of his own, Madame another. He had an idea that there were others in the long brick building which served as a garage, one of a number of structures, which, standing at some distance from the house, seemed to be a sort of settlement by itself, shut off from the rest of the premises by tall iron railings which he had never been invited to pass. He wondered what time it was. His watch had never been returned to him, but there was a clock upon a shelf. He struck a match, one of those disagreeable French matches which reek of sulphur, and lit a candle. In the reception rooms and, so far as he knew, all over the house, was installed the electric light, with the exception of his own apartment. He had to be content with candles, four new ones being provided nightly.

So far as he could see with the aid of the flickering candle, it was half-past three. It was late for a motor-car; the household had retired soon after ten. As he was wondering whom it had brought or whom it was taking away, all at once the whole house seemed to be filled with tumult. Half a dozen people seemed to be speaking together at the top of their voices, male and female. That there were shouts and yells, as of persons beside themselves with passion; then a wild uproar, as if an angry crowd were quarrelling; then a long and piercing shriek that was surely a woman's; then three pistol shots fired in rapid succession. These pistol shots seemed to have brought matters to a climax. The din which ensued

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suggested that a scene of fierce contention was taking place below. And, in the midst of it, he heard—surely the voice was Alice Hudson's! Was it not she who was screaming?

He was out of bed in an instant; without waiting to put on slippers, he rushed in his pyjamas to the door. It was locked; it could not be locked—there was neither key nor bolt. He tugged and tugged in vain. The door was secured somehow. Then, in that case, it must have been fastened on the other side by someone who meant to keep him where he was, while—while Heaven alone knew what was taking place downstairs.

The noise had been less for a few seconds, then the shouts and yells broke out again and the woman screamed. He had never before heard her scream, but he knew that it was Alice Hudson. Perhaps she was screaming to him for help, and the door was fastened; he was shut in. There was the dressing-room; he might get out that way. He dashed off to see. The door which opened into the dressing-room was fastened, he could not get into the room at all. The intention was to keep him a prisoner; that was what the fastening of these doors meant, while some dastardly deed was being done below, of which the girl was the victim.

He rushed to the window. The casements were large enough to admit plenty of light and air, but altogether too small for him to get his body through. More than once he had been struck by the fact that

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their size barely permitted him to thrust his head out into the open, and had vaguely wondered if the idea had been to prevent their being used as a means of egress. He had no doubt about it now.

He could hear better when he had got his head out. The motor-car was on the other side of the house, probably in front of the main entrance. The centre of disturbance seemed to be advancing from that direction. It seemed possible that two parties were fighting and struggling, the object of the one being to turn the other out of the house—an object which had been suddenly attained, for clearly the shouters, or at least some of them, had come into the open air. They bellowed and roared rather than spoke to each other. What they said he had no notion, although he could hear them as plainly as if they had been immediately underneath his window. He could not even distinguish the language which was being used. If it was French, it was a kind of French with which he was unfamiliar, or he would surely have been able to make out a word here and there. He strained his ears to catch the woman's voice. Had they silenced her? It seemed to have ceased. Then all at once she screamed again, if anything louder than before. And then immediately, as if by a common impulse, the uproar rose higher than ever. The tumult must have been audible for miles across the silent country. She might have screamed to him; they might have taken steps to prevent her screaming again; and he was within a few yards, a

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helpless prisoner. He yelled aloud in his impotent rage.

"You brutes! You hounds! You curs! You cowards! Let me out! Come and unfasten the door! You shall pay for it if you don't."

It seemed as if his voice must have been heard. It was followed by a silence which, after the tumult of a moment ago, seemed almost magical. Nothing was audible except the throbbing engine of the motor-car. What was taking place on the other side of the house? Who was it they were putting in the car?

Suppose it were Alice? For the first time he spoke of her, even to himself, by her Christian name. Suppose she were being borne off against her will to an unknown destination which she had only too good reason to fear. The thought maddened him. He yelled out threats and objurgations without any notice being taken of the noise he made. Returning to the doors of his room, he banged at them with his fists, with articles of furniture, without making any visible impression on their solidity, or, apparently, even being heard without. That he had made himself audible, however, seemed clear from the fact that the tumult had entirely ceased. When he went back to the window he had a notion that he could hear voices speaking in subdued tones; but of that he was not sure. One thing, however, he presently did hear, and that was the motor moving off. It was moving down the long winding road which led to the gates.

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He had never been down that road himself. His hostess had made it clear that that road was private—not for him to walk on. And since even the entrance to it was barred by fantastic iron gates, it had not struck him that its privacy was worth intruding on.

The night was very still; the car was moving swiftly—yet he could hear it long after it had left the house. He pictured it tearing over the silent roads, bound for he knew not what destination; his heart sank because he did not even dare to ask himself who might be among its passengers.

The clock on the mantel told him that it was past six. It was broad daylight; yet, since it seemed that no good purpose was to be gained by his staying out of bed, he returned between the sheets, and sleep, with that perversity which is so often hers, must instantly have claimed him for her own. The next he knew was that Achille was standing by his bedside with his morning coffee.

"Monsieur has slept well?" was his invariable morning greeting. He did not omit it on this occasion. The young man, looking up at him with sleepy eyes, suddenly woke to a consciousness of what had happened in the night. He sat up in bed.

"Why did you lock my door last night?"

The man's amazement at the unceremonious fashion in which the question was hurled at his head seemed genuine.

"Pardon? What did monsieur say?"

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"Someone locked my door last night, or fastened it somehow. Was it you?"

To judge from his looks, the man's amazement only grew.

"I do not understand, monsieur. I have only just come in. The door was not locked."

"Yes, I dare say, because you opened it. It was fastened last night—locked, or bolted, or both. I know that I was shut in. Do you mean to say that you don't know it?"

The man smiled, as if the other had been talking in his sleep.

"Monsieur dreams. How does monsieur know that it was fastened? Did you not sleep?"

"No nonsense, Achille, if you please; I'm not a fool. When that row began it awoke me. I tried to get out of the room, but both doors were fastened, as I have no doubt you are perfectly well aware. I want to know who fastened them."

Achille smiled still more.

"Has monsieur not observed these doors? There is no lock to either, and no bolt; that is why madame never puts a lady in these rooms—why she always keeps them for a gentleman. Neither door can be fastened either from within or without. Does not monsieur see?"

Monsieur did see. Achille had the door open, and was demonstrating the fact that, except for the catch, which was worked by the handle, there was no means of even shutting it. Now that he looked,

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Denton realised that he had previously noticed the absence of even a keyhole, or any visible means of keeping anyone either out or in.

"I don't know how it was done," he said, "but it was fastened last night so that I couldn't get out of the room, that I'll swear; and it was kept fastened all the time that row was going on."

"Row?" Achille raised his eyebrows. "What row? Did monsieur hear a noise in the night?"

"Didn't you? Look here, Achille, you really must think I'm a simpleton. I'm not going to ask you what it was all about, but when you ask if I heard a noise—well, I'm quite sure the din must have disturbed the whole countryside—it's as funny as when you try to make me believe that my door wasn't fastened."

Achille shrugged his shoulders, still the soul of deference.

"I trust monsieur will excuse me, but I cannot but think that monsieur's sleep was disturbed by bad dreams. How could the door be fastened when there is nothing with which to fasten it? And it never has been fastened. As for the din of which he speaks—I am a light sleeper; to sleep lightly is part of my profession; the least sound disturbs me—I assure monsieur that I heard nothing."

With a smile for which Denton could have thrown something at him, yet with an air of the most perfect deference, Achille left the room.

CHAPTER X

ACHILLE

HURRYING through his dressing, directly his toilet was finished Ronald Denton went downstairs earlier than was his wont. After the uproar which had marked the small hours he had a hazy impression that he might find everything in disorder, furniture broken or disarranged, tell-tale signs of one kind or another. His vague anticipations were not realised; everything was as it had been; there was nothing to show that anything unusual had taken place. As he seemed to be the first person down, he potted aimlessly about, waiting for the appearance of Miss Hudson. He might be able to glean information from her. The minutes passed; she did not come. The clock told him that it was getting on for noon; such tardiness was not like her. As a rule she was down before he was. He met Achille in the hall.

"Can you tell me if Miss Hudson has descended?"

"I am unable to inform monsieur."

"I don't believe she has come down. Where's her room? Can't someone run up and see?"

"I know nothing about mademoiselle; her room is not in my department."

"In whose department is it, then? I want some-

Achille

one to go up with a message from me. Where's Antoinette?"

Antoinette was the extremely smart young woman who seemed to occupy the position of Mme. de Constal's personal maid.

"I cannot inform monsieur."

"What do you mean? I suppose you can tell me where Antoinette is? Do you wish me to go to the servants' quarters and find out for myself? Where is M. de Girodet? Where's everyone? No one seems to be about."

"I beg monsieur to have the goodness to understand that I am concerned with my own duties only; for the proper performance of those duties I am responsible to Mme. de Constal alone."

The man's manner was perfectly respectful, though his words conveyed an unmistakable snub.

"Does that mean that you have been instructed not to answer any questions?"

"What it means is very simple, monsieur; if monsieur will permit me to attend to my work."

The man withdrew, Denton letting him go, since there seemed to be no valid excuse for detaining him. Yet he was left with a sense of uneasiness; a feeling that after all there was something unwonted in the air. He saw nothing of Miss Hudson, or of Mme. de Constal, or of Antoinette, or of anyone. M. de Girodet's comings and goings were so irregular that his absence did not count. He wondered what had become of Mme. Lamotte; she had only returned to

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the house the day before, as he had understood, for a stay of some duration.

Among the many things about the house which were odd was its construction. He had told the girl one day that it seemed to him to have been built on the principle of a modern ship, in water-tight compartments. Each set of rooms seemed to be segregated from all the others; unexpected doors had a trick of appearing in all sorts of unlikely places. His bedroom was in a corner on the first-floor landing. The corridor leading to the other apartments was screened by long and handsome green silk curtains. Since there seemed to be no one about to give him information, having ascended the stairs, he drew aside the curtains, intending to seek some for himself, and to his amazement found himself confronted by a heavy oak door. He had been along that corridor several times, and had never suspected the existence of such a thing. He was aware that there were such doors about the building. Miss Hudson had informed him that Mme. de Constal's private apartments were shut off by such a one, and that there were others which caused her sometimes to wonder what might be behind them. But where that particular door had come from, in a single night, was a mystery to Ronald Denton. He stared at it in what was very like stupid bewilderment.

Its significance was obvious; his presence was not desired along that corridor. No inquiries were to be made; the most effective steps had been taken

Achille

to secure his entire seclusion. The door was fastened, as he learnt by trying the handle. He rapped against the panels three or four times; either the wood was of unusual solidity, or else it was cased with metal; his rappings went unheeded. Returning to the hall, he pursued his investigations in other directions. He would visit the servants' quarters and hunt up Antoinette.

The approach to their domain was screened by another green silk curtain; those curtains were all over the house. If his surprise, when he discovered a second door behind that curtain, was not so great as when he had found the first, it was because he was beginning to have at least a hazy perception of the actual state of affairs. The only part of the building he was free to enter, he presently learned, was the small group of reception rooms which opened off the hall, and the door of the largest of these, the salon, was locked against him. His was a case of isolation; he was to hold no communication with the rest of the house; and, seemingly, with the exception of Achille, the rest of the house did not intend to communicate with him.

He was in the hall when he arrived at this state of perception, and was asking himself what he was to do next, when Achille, the urbane, appearing, made a deferential announcement.

"Monsieur, luncheon is served."

Denton looked at the man with a certain grim amusement.

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"Oh, so I am to have luncheon, am I?" He went into the dining-room; the table was laid for one. "I am to have it alone, am I? Is it any use, Achille, my asking you to inform me what has become of Mme. de Constal and of Miss Hudson?"

"Monsieur will have soup?" That was the only answer Achille gave as he stood by the tureen.

"No, Achille, I will not have soup." The man offered him a dish of smelts, grilled a delicate golden brown. "You are so full of information, Achille, that I am aware that I have only to hint at a desire to know how you get backwards and forwards from the kitchen, to say nothing of the dishes, for you to tumble over yourself in the desire to flood me with answers."

"Monsieur will have white wine or red?"

"I wonder what would happen if I were to break your head with a bottle? Is it the intention that I am to regard myself as a prisoner, and you as my jailer?"

"Monsieur finds the smelts well cooked?"

Ronald Denton put down his knife and fork; he eyed the imperturbable attendant with the consciousness that the man's coolness was making him warm.

"Let us understand each other, Achille, if such a thing be possible. Something happened in the small hours of this morning which could not but convey a sinister significance to the most unsophisticated mind. If murder was not done, it was not for the want of trying. I heard shrieks, and oaths, the

Achille

sound of people fighting, struggling, exchanging blows; three pistol shots were fired; women shrieked as if in mortal pain and terror. When I asked you what all these things meant, you said that my sleep must have been troubled, and that I dreamt them. You say that you never heard an unusual sound. Achille, you are a liar." He regarded his plate. "Give me some more smelts; they are good."

The man brought him the dish, nothing in his demeanour suggesting that he was in the least degree ruffled. The young man continued :

"There was a motor-car. I heard it come and go. I heard someone being forced into it against—her will; I say her will, Achille. This morning I discover that the house is empty, with the exception, apparently, of you and me. Mysterious doors appear in unexpected places, and are locked against me. I want you to tell me what those doors mean, what is behind them, and what has become of the ladies, especially of Miss Hudson. Be so good as to understand, Achille, that I am putting these questions to you and await your answers."

"Monsieur will have some roast chicken? It is a little one—what we in France call a *poulet de grain*. I think monsieur will find it good."

"Yes, Achille, I will have some chicken while you consider your answers to my questions. Well? I wait. Are you going to answer?"

"Monsieur will have more wine?"

"Look here, Achille, you are going to answer. I

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fancy you are a stronger man than I am, but, all the same, you are going to answer—and before you leave this room.”

“Monsieur found the salad to his taste? You will have cheese? There is Brie, and there is Camembert, there is cheese of the country.”

“You are going to answer at least one of my questions, Achille. What has become of Miss Hudson?”

Denton took the valet by the arm as he offered him cheese.

“Monsieur wishes for no cheese?”

With a quick little movement Achille slipped his arm away, returning to the sideboard with the cheese, leaving the young man looking rather foolish. His tone suggested that he was nettled.

“Does that mean that you do not propose to answer? I tell you you will before you leave this room.”

The valet had all the component parts of the meal on a big silver chafing-dish. Having arranged the coffee-pot, cup and saucer and sugar on a little tray, he bore them to him.

“Monsieur will have coffee? I will give monsieur all the information which is in my power after he has drunk his coffee, while he smokes a cigarette.” He poured out a cup. “Monsieur will have one lump of sugar? I trust that monsieur will find that the coffee is good.”

Denton was raising the cup of coffee to his lips

Achille

—he had almost got it there—when a thought occurred to him. Returning the cup to the saucer, rising suddenly to his feet, he took the valet by the shoulder.

“Achille, will you do me the favour to drink this cup of coffee?”

The man looked him in the face with his usual air of unruffled serenity.

“Monsieur does not wish for any coffee?”

“I wish, Achille, that you should drink it.”

Achille, picking up the cup, replaced it on the tray which he was still holding.

“I did not understand that monsieur did not wish for coffee.”

Denton tightened his grip. “Achille, you will do me the favour to drink that coffee.”

“Will monsieur have the goodness to remove his hand?”

The two men eyed each other, as if they were measuring each other's strength. Denton gripped the man's shoulder harder still.

“Are you going to drink that coffee?”

“Why does monsieur wish me to drink the coffee which was intended for himself? It is not part of my duty to eat and drink what monsieur does not want. Monsieur seems to be under the impression that all sorts of things come within my province which are no concern of mine.”

“I believe that coffee is drugged, and you drugged it. You can only make me believe that it isn't by drinking it yourself. It is owing to a little accident

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of that kind that I am at present in the Château d'Ernan, as I have no doubt you are aware. I do not mean, if I can help it, to walk into the trap again. Once bit, twice shy. Are you going to drink that coffee?" He held the man's shoulders with both his hands.

"Monsieur will allow me to observe that I do not permit anyone to handle me as he is doing. If monsieur does not wish to suffer inconvenience he will take his hands away."

"I believe, Achille, that you are an infernal scoundrel. The conviction is growing on me stronger and stronger every moment. You will find that there are limits to my endurance, and that I do not intend that you should drug me with impunity. Are you going to drink that coffee?" He raised his head as if to listen. "What noise was that?"

"It sounded like a bell."

"It was a bell. Who rang it?"

"It is possible that I rang it. If monsieur will look carefully at the floor he will see that there is a little round mark; when it is touched by the foot in a particular manner it causes a bell to ring. Monsieur perceives that little round spot."

Ronald Denton bent forward, the better to enable him to see to what the other referred. As he did so, someone approaching from behind threw a cloth over his head, which was saturated with some sickly-smelling stuff. He struggled, but, taken un-awares, was at a disadvantage. The cloth was drawn

Achille

tightly about his head and pressed against his face. The last thing he remembered was what he believed to be the sound of Achille's laughter, and a voice, which might also have been the valet's, though it was pitched in tones which were new to him, exclaiming :

“ The English fool ! ”

CHAPTER XI

CHÂTEAU D'ENFER

"I TRUST that monsieur feels rested?"

Ronald Denton could not make out where he was; then he realised that he was lying on the couch in his bedroom, and that Achille was standing with respectful mien at his side. The young man put his hand up to his head; the room seemed to be swimming round him; he felt generally queer. No one could have been more solicitous for his well-being than the valet de chambre. Comfortable words streamed from him in soft, purring tones.

"If monsieur would but be reasonable all would be so pleasant. My duty is to see that monsieur wants for nothing, that all his tastes are studied, if monsieur will only permit me to do my duty. Monsieur will perhaps find that a cup of tea will relieve his head."

Achille took himself out of the room on those noiseless feet of his and shut the door. Denton, with his eyes closed, was scarcely conscious of his going. When he looked round he perceived that the equipage for tea was on a little table close at hand. Presently, putting his feet on the floor and pouring out a cup of tea, he tried to collect his scattered

Château d'Enfer

senses. What precisely had happened it was not easy to determine, but it was borne in on him by degrees that the ingenious Achille had proved more than his match, and that on the lines in which he had tried to move he always would be.

He did not go down again that night, although Achille assured him that an excellent dinner awaited his attention. The anæsthetic had been stronger, perhaps, than was necessary; he felt sick and giddy, with no stomach for food. The valet charmed in vain. That night, however, he slept well, without interruption, until Achille's appearance at his bedside with the inevitable coffee told him that it was time to wake.

There were no signs of the ladies when he went down; apparently he was still alone in the house. It was a fine morning; he was inclined for a walk, if only to learn how far his liberty went. He walked right across the grounds, no one trying to stop him. So far as he could see, he had the whole place to himself. What his sudden solitude portended he had no notion; he missed his usual companion to a degree which surprised himself. The whole place, the winding walks, the nooks and dells, the ups and downs, all these were hateful to him. With her at his side they had seemed so pleasant. Black care was his sole companion; nameless terrors walked behind; a prospect of horror loomed ahead.

He came to an extraordinary fence, about eight or nine feet high, formed of strands of barbed wire

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only a few inches apart. He walked along it. Open fields were on the other side. Presently he came on a man who was slouching across one of these fields with some tools over his shoulder. Denton hailed him in rather unceremonious fashion.

"Hi! You! Come here! I want to speak to you."

The man, turning, answered from where he stood.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to give me some information. What's the name of the place I'm in?"

The man stared as if he did not understand; then he grinned. He was an unkempt, surly-looking individual of about fifty. Denton set him down as being possibly a small farmer.

"Don't you know what place that is? That's the Château d'Enfer."

It was the young man's turn to stare. The answer was not what he had expected.

"Isn't that rather strong? Why do you call it that?"

"Why? Because it is. That's what it's known as all over this part of the country." The man hesitated, then came closer; the two stared at each other through the fence. "If you are a foreigner, and an honest man, you'll take yourself out of that as fast as ever you can and go back to your own land. That's a den of thieves; that's what that is, and if you're not one of them, and don't want to be skinned, that's no place for you."

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"You use vigorous language, my friend. What grounds have you for saying such things?"

"I could tell you tales about that place which would take your breath away. There isn't one this side of the fence who would go that side for anything you could offer; heaven's this side, hell's the other."

"I doubt, my friend, if you're entitled to talk like that. Do you know anything about Mme. de Constal?"

"Do I know anything?" The man spat on the ground. "Isn't it she who has made the place what it is? If law was justice her head would have been off her shoulders long ago, and all decent folks would have rejoiced to know it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know what I mean? Perhaps that's how it is you come to be where you are, if you're as ignorant as that; and the sooner you get out the better. Don't you know that she killed her husband?"

"I take it that you are jesting. You should be more careful of your words."

"If you call it jesting, you've your own notions of a joke, and as for being more careful of my words, all France has said it. Didn't M. de Constal, like the old fool he was, marry her when her name was a byword? And when he found out that she was even worse than she had been painted, didn't she poison him? And wasn't she tried for her life? And, as I

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say, if law was justice they'd have found her guilty, and her head would have been off her shoulders long ago. But some say it was one thing, and some say it was another; and by the exercise of some of her devilish arts she managed to get off, and back she came to her husband's house, the house which he had left her before he found out what she was; back she came to it with a face of brass. And if only a small part of the tales which are told are true, hell's a paradise compared to the hell that she's made of it. The Château d'Enfer, that's what it is." The man shook his clenched fist towards the house with a passionate gesture. "And there never was a fouler murderess than the one that lives in it. She knows what I think, and what all the world thinks; but what does she care?" All at once the man's tone changed. "So it's you, you black face, is it? Every time I don't see you for a few days I hope they've got you back in jail again. It only shows what things have come to that they should let you run loose so long."

The man was speaking to someone behind Denton, who turned to see who it was. Mme. Lamotte was moving towards him with her stiff, ungainly, long-legged strides.

"Had not monsieur better return to the house?"

The words, put in the form of a question, in reality conveyed a command. He understood this still more clearly when he saw loitering among the trees a figure which he recognised as that of an individual who

Château d'Enfer

acted as a gardener, and whom he had heard addressed as Durand.

"I wondered what had become of you, Mme. Lamotte. I have been trying in vain to get information from Achille. Our friend out there uses some very plain language; perhaps you heard some of it."

The expression on the woman's face made it very plain that she had. Her reply made it even plainer.

"That man's name is Joseph Coton. He was once in madame's employ. When she found him behaving improperly she dismissed him. Ever since he has filled the air with lies."

Denton was moving by her side in the direction of the house. The man on the other side of the fence shouted after them.

"What story is she telling you? She is a thief, that woman, and has been in half the jails in France. Beware of her. If you are not cut out of the same stuff as she is you will give her a wide berth. I have something here which will cut wire. Let her say what she likes, I will tear down this fence in front of her face to enable you to get through. As for Durand among the trees there, let him try to stop me if he dare. Only say the word, and the thing shall be done."

He would have liked to say the word, a fact which Mme. Lamotte's words made clear that she perceived. She gave him what she clearly meant to be a word of warning.

"If you are wise you will not listen to that fool;

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you will close your ears to him." She raised her voice. "Durand! Durand, here is Joseph Coton threatening to cut down the fence before my face; it is time that you should talk to him."

When he regained the house he found Mme. de Constal in the hall, warming her feet at the great log fire. She was dressed for travelling, and looked as if she had just returned from a journey. She greeted him with a smile.

"How is Mr. Dennett? I hope you are warmer than I am. I've been shut up in a motor-car for hours and hours, since before even it was day, and, oh, it was so cold! In a motor-car, it seems to me, nothing will keep out the cold. If I had my shoes and stockings off you would be able to feel that my feet are like lumps of ice, and when my feet are cold I am cold all over."

He was thinking, as he eyed her, of what the man on the other side of the fence had said about this woman. It seemed incredible. In her furs she looked so stately, so dainty, so every inch a great lady. It was impossible that she could ever have been tried for her life—that people could think of her the things the man had spoken of. Throwing her veil farther back off her face, she regarded him with her curious, laughing eyes.

"You are pleased to see me, is it not so? I am pleased to see you."

"Where is Miss Hudson?" The abruptness with which he put the question seemed to tickle her.

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"Miss Hudson? I return after a long, tiresome, and, oh! such a cold journey, wanting to be made a fuss of, to be warmly welcomed, to be received with rapture, and all you say is, 'Where is Miss Hudson?' And you say it as if it were a stick with which to knock me down. Since the first moment in which I met you, Mr. Dennett, you have shown that you have the gift of saying the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. Have you found the house a little dull? Perhaps that is it; loneliness has weighed upon your spirit."

"I have had Achille for company."

"Achille?" She laughed outright. "He is not always very gay; his conversation is not always of the liveliest. Say, Mr. Dennett, that you have missed me, although I have been away from you, after all, such a little time."

"I have missed you, Mme. de Constal."

"That is better; we advance. And next?"

"Because I wished to ask you what has become of Miss Hudson."

"That is why you have missed me? That is the only reason? What a master of compliments! Miss Hudson seems to have made on you a very great impression, since you seem so very plainly to have missed her."

"I am aware that I am only a puppet in your hands; and not only in yours, but also in the hands of your servants, or your associates—I do not know which they are. Is it necessary that you should

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persist in playing such an elaborate farce? You have robbed me of my money; I am your unwilling guest; there is only one creature in this singular place in whom I take the slightest interest. Is there any reason why you should not tell me what has become of her? She also, unfortunately for her, is a puppet in your hands. Have you good cause for not wishing me to know in what manner it has pleased you—to pull the strings?"

It was some seconds before she spoke. She was disengaging herself from her furs. The great chair at her side was covered with her wraps.

"May I ask you to help me to get out of this coat, as it is heavy, and my maid is not just at hand?" He did as she requested. She continued to talk as she slipped out of the sleeves. "Do you remember how that first night I was so unwilling that you should come near enough to touch me? Now I do not mind your near neighbourhood in the least; I rather like it. I do not even mind your rudeness. You are such a good-looking boy. And even when you try to be rude you cannot hide the fact that you are a gentleman. Does it make you angry when I tell you that you are good-looking?"

He was placing her great fur coat on the back of a chair. When he turned his cheeks were flushed, a fact on which she instantly commented.

"You do look cross; but then you are so easily cross. See what things you have been saying of me; and am I cross? Not at all. And what things

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Joseph Coton has been telling of me, do I not know? I know them all. Yet—I only smile; my temper is so good.”

“How do you know that Joseph Coton—if that is the fellow’s name—has been speaking to me at all? There was not a soul anywhere within sight or sound. Certainly you weren’t.”

She admonished him with the forefinger of her right hand, which was almost covered with rings.

“My dear Mr. Dennett, there is nothing I do not know. The air itself is like a telephone; at Château d’Ernan, or, as Coton prefers to call it, Château d’Enfer, the air itself acts as a telephone which conducts to my ears everything that is said. But what do I care? I care nothing for what Joseph Coton says, because he is old and ugly; and I care nothing for what you say, because you are young and handsome.”

“All this shows that you are a very wonderful person, which I never doubted. I had the best of reasons for knowing it, but it is no answer to my question: What has become of Miss Hudson?”

“Mr. Dennett, I will tell you something which you do not deserve to be told. Open your ears; lose not a word. One of the reasons why I am back so soon is to talk to you about that young lady. But since what I have to say to you is of a very delicate nature—everything about Miss Hudson is of a delicate nature—it is therefore of importance that we should be very private, which in this place we per-

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haps are not. It is desirable that we should be somewhere where privacy is assured. I am very tired, Mr. Dennett. Have pity on me."

She made a graceful little gesture expressive of fatigue, which he thought became her very well.

"I am not fit to talk on such a subject as Miss Hudson with the delicacy which the subject demands. Let us postpone our conversation for a little while. After a long journey I like to change all my clothes, to put myself into things which are sweet and clean and fresh. Then I like to have something to eat and drink; afterwards I am ready to talk. So, with your permission, I will go to my own room. We shall meet again at lunch, and then we will discuss Miss Hudson."

CHAPTER XII

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

MME. DE CONSTAL and Ronald Denton lunched together, the ineffable Achille ministering to their wants. During the meal little was said. Afterwards they adjourned to the oak-panelled chamber in which Denton had first seen his hostess. Mme. de Constal, insisting that she had not yet recovered from the chill of travelling, installed herself on a great couch, over which had been thrown a fine piece of old tapestry.

"This tapestry," she informed Ronald, "tells the story of the love of a high-born damsel for a humble squire. It was worked by ladies of the Constal family whose ashes even exist no more, which shows what a venerable institution love is. Draw the couch in front of the fire, arrange these cushions under my head, light my cigarette, place my coffee and liqueur just where I can reach them, make me comfortable altogether, and then—then we'll discuss Miss Hudson."

As he obeyed her orders she put out her hand and caught him by the wrist, gripping him with fingers which were stronger than they looked.

"Kneel by my side; look me in the eyes. Can you see nothing there which pleases you? You

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silly boy! Why won't you kneel? I won't let you go till you do. Why, how you have flushed! Is it temper, or what is the matter with the child? Oh, go away; I never did have any use for boys."

She threw his hand laughingly from her. He crossed, with a shamefaced air, to the easy chair which was on the other side of the fireplace. Arranging himself in its comfortable recesses, he glowered at the lady on the couch.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me what has become of Miss Hudson?"

"You dear, simple youth! Is she for him the only woman in the world? Frankly, Mr. Dennett, it was thought advisable to withdraw the young lady, at least for a season, from the Château d'Ernan—because of you."

The young man sat up straighter in his chair, glowering more than ever.

"What do you mean by that? That's not an answer to my question. Where is Miss Hudson?"

"If you will have a little patience, young gentleman, I will give you as straight an answer as you can desire. Only do try and realise that there may be another point of view besides your own. It never occurs to you, I presume, that a young lady might stand in need of protection from you."

"Miss Hudson certainly did not."

"You think so, really? How odd! How blind one can be to one's own little weaknesses. You were continually in Miss Hudson's society, morning,

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noon, and night; often alone with her. I know that in England there is a certain freedom in such matters; but you know as well as I know that there are limits even in England. It is a delicate question for one of my age, because I am not yet ancient, to have to put to a young gentleman; but I have to put it. Since, her mother being dead, I have to stand to the girl in the place of a parent, what might your intentions be regarding Miss Hudson, Mr. Dennett?"

He got on to his feet, glaring at her with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

"What on earth are you driving at? I ask you a plain question, and you try to slip out of answering it like this! Where is Miss Hudson?"

"You needn't shout. I can hear you without your raising your voice, you funny boy. Miss Hudson is in safe keeping, where you can't get at her, and there she will remain till you have made it safe for her to return to the Château d'Ernan by giving me your assurance that you intend to make her your wife."

The young man presented a picture of puzzled amazement which tickled her so that she had to lay her head back upon the cushions to enable her to give vent to her amusement. He bit his lip, as if to keep back words which it might be unbecoming to use in the presence of a woman. When he spoke it was with an air of coldness which was evidently but a cover for the fire which raged within.

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"When you have quite done laughing, may I ask you to explain to me exactly what you mean?"

Looking up at him from the scarlet silk cushion on which her head was pillowed, she returned him question for question :

"What kind of girl do you take Miss Hudson to be? Will you tell me that?"

He hesitated, clearly because he was at a loss for appropriate words.

"You may laugh at me again, if, in view of what we know of each other, I tell you I am unwilling to say anything which may hurt your feelings, if they can be hurt; but, quite frankly, I decline to discuss Miss Hudson with you."

"That means, I presume, that you have simply been amusing yourself at her expense, that you really do not care for her one snap of your fingers, that you don't consider her a fit and proper person to make your wife, and that, anyhow, you don't mean to marry her?"

"You talk about my marrying, you—that—that——"

"That rather pretty girl. You must own that, at least, she is rather pretty."

"You speak of her as 'rather pretty,' she who is one of the loveliest beings that ever walked God's earth—if it is God's earth! Since I got in this place, I've been wondering if it isn't the Devil's. As if she were only rather pretty, she who is the soul of truth and faith and innocence, the soul of all things good

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and pure, as high above the people into whose hands she has fallen as heaven is above the earth; and you talk of her as being 'rather pretty'!"

She had been looking at him with her eyes opened to their widest capacity.

"So he can speak after all; he can say something besides 'Yes' and 'No.' What eloquence, what an unexpected command of language, what a gift of discriminating observation is unexpectedly revealed. Listen to me, my simple youth, and answer one simple question. If Alice Hudson returns to the Château d'Ernan, will you marry her?"

He looked as if words were about to burst from him; then, as if conscious that he might regret them after they were spoken, he turned away, and, crossing to the window, stood looking out at the grounds. Where he stood, since he was at the back of the couch, she could not see his face, which was possibly one reason why he stood there. For some moments his candid countenance was like a mirror, betraying the tempestuous emotions which stormed within. When, after a prolonged interval of silence, no answer came, she asked:

"Well, have you run away to hide? Brave lad! Poor, innocent, tender-hearted Alice! That she should have been made the plaything of a cruel man! She deserved a better fate. I suppose the doors of the Château d'Ernan are closed to her for ever. And I was so happy with her beneath my roof."

The lady sighed, with what degree of sincerity the

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lady only knew. She put her handkerchief to her eyes—a minute, filigree thing, which would have been damped by a single tear.

“I did not think, Mr. Robert Dennett, that with all your faults your nature was quite so cruel as it is.”

“If it amuses you to mock at me, go on. I suppose a woman can do this kind of thing, when a man can’t.”

“A man! You don’t call yourself a man? Men—real, true men—don’t treat women as you have treated Alice Hudson.”

All at once the lady’s manner changed. Raising herself to a more upright position on her couch, she assumed quite a different air.

“Come, Mr. Dennett, let’s get to business. You compromise this girl——”

“I have compromised her? I?”

“Yes, you, you. I am a better judge of what compromises a girl than you are, you beardless booby, and I tell you that you have compromised her. There is only one reparation you can make her, and that is marriage. You may take it from me that whatever injury you have done her, she is a girl who will do any man credit as his wife.”

“Do you think I need you to tell me that?”

“Then what do you need? Is she personally offensive to you, Mr. Dennett?”

“Offensive to me? What a notion! When her presence has made the Château d’Ernan seem paradise.”

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"Come, Mr. Dennett, be frank. If that is the attitude of your mind, tell me candidly why you won't marry her."

"I really am unable to decide whether you ask that question seriously or not; it's—it's past believing."

"Disabuse your mind of all nonsense, Mr. Dennett. Never was a question more seriously asked of anyone than I ask that question of you. Why don't you marry her?"

"Has it escaped your memory what kind of person I am?"

"Nothing escapes my memory, as I should have thought your presence here made quite clear. I don't see what could make it clearer. Why do you ask?"

"You are aware that I am what is called 'wanted for murder,' that I have been arrested once, and that probably before this a second warrant for my arrest has been issued to take the place of the first."

"I doubt it. I cannot see how they can have any positive information; but I fancy that your death has been taken for granted."

"Even supposing that to be the case, what difference does it make?"

"I should say a good deal of difference, if you think it out. Since I am the only person in the world who has even a faint suspicion that you are alive, and I'm the most unsuspicious creature that ever lived, it appears to me that you are really dead. Certainly the person who bore that objectionable name is dead

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—Mr. Robert Dennett is alive. It is Mr. Robert Dennett whom I am asking why he will not marry the young girl of whose reputation he has made such havoc.”

“I deny it. What you say is false.”

“You may deny it. You may appear to be that sort of person; but that makes no difference to the fact. The girl is compromised—by you.”

“I would sooner cut my right hand off than do her the slightest injury, or approach to an injury. So far from destroying her reputation, I would be perfectly willing to sacrifice my worthless life in defence of it. One day I shall be in a position to prove it.”

“Tall talk — flummery — bunkum — flapdoodle — piffle—tosh—I believe that some of those words are English. For the last time I ask you: Are you willing to marry Alice Hudson?”

“Willing? What a way to put it! Of course I am willing!”

“Then that’s enough. If you had said so at the beginning some unpleasantness might have been saved.”

“Hear me out! Let me finish!”

“I would rather you did not finish, and I have heard all that I want to hear. You say you are willing to marry Alice Hudson. Good! That is equivalent to an assurance; you will keep to your word. Miss Hudson’s return to the Château d’Ernan shall be presently arranged, and, on her return, the

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position shall be regularised. You must excuse me; there are several matters which claim my attention. You have already detained me longer than I intended."

She moved towards the door. He interposed himself.

"You misunderstand me entirely; you twist my words. You give them a construction they were never intended to bear."

"You must allow me to interrupt you, Mr. Dennett, and to request you to favour me with no more of your flapdoodle. You have expressed your willingness to marry Alice Hudson. That expression is all I require. You shall. Be so good as to let me pass. Open the door."

He opened it, almost without intending to. She went through it. He stared after her as she crossed the hall and, ascending the staircase, passed out of sight.

CHAPTER XIII

ALICE'S ADVENTURE

DURING the days which ensued Ronald Denton would not have found it easy to say if his state was one of torment or of rapture. The idea of marrying Alice Hudson would never have got into his head had not Mme. de Constal put it there. But since she had, he could not get it out. Had all things been well with him, his notion of perfect happiness would have been marriage with the girl who had made even the Château d'Ernan seem at times a paradise. But things were not going well; they never would—they never could. Each day brought him nearer to a shameful end. He was this woman's catspaw. This Mme. de Constal had but to snap her fingers to squeeze him out of existence. He was as much a criminal under sentence of capital punishment as if he had been already tried and sentenced. That, at least, was his point of view. To him it seemed to be the only possible one.

That a wretch circumstanced as he was, blood upon his hands, the gallows staring him in the face, should associate himself, even remotely, with a young girl into whose few short years so much unhappiness had been crowded, and for whom the

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future should hold such promise of love, joy, and all sorts of pleasant things—it was unthinkable. He might be a criminal, but he was not such a thing as that.

Yet the rapture when his eyes were closed, and projecting a mental picture—holding her in his arms, so close that he felt the sweet contours of her dear form, her breath upon his cheeks, her soft breathing as her lips touched his. If only it had been possible to make such a dream real! But, since the one thing for which he waited was the policeman's tap upon his shoulder, a crowded court gaping at the prisoner in the dock, with worse to follow! Shudderingly he tried to drive such visions from him. In what was left to him of life there was no place for her. Why this woman had conceived of such a thing was a puzzle—unless it was because she loved evil for evil's sake. It was a crime so foul that it beggared imagination to propose to link this girl's fate with his. Surely this woman had method in her madness, reason in her dreadful plans. She must have some weighty motive which prompted her to make such a heinous proposition. What could it be?

Three days passed. So far as he knew, save Achille, Mme. de Constal and he were the sole inmates of that great house. Nor did his hostess favour him with overmuch of her society. She found him, as she plainly told him, extremely dull, her own society more cheerful.

"You sit opposite me," she said on the third day,

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when they had finished luncheon and Achille had left them together to drink their coffee, "with that kind of face which is the cook's worst enemy—it makes every dish taste as if there were something wrong with it. How can one enjoy the most perfect *plat* with something worse than a skull and cross-bones glowering at one from the other side of the table? And as for conversation, you were better dumb; silence would be infinitely preferable to the kind of remark you make when I do succeed in making you say something. I am most anxious to do my duty as a hostess, but I don't want to feel every time I see you as if I were the chief mourner at a funeral. You gave me what in England I believe they call the 'creepy-crawlies.' Please enjoy yourself alone."

And the lady flitted from the room. The young gentleman, with an expression which certainly was not gay, went out to take the air. A more suggestive picture than he presented of a mind ill at ease as, with bent shoulders, downcast eyes, and heavy feet, he dragged himself listlessly, hopelessly, through the castle grounds, it would not have been easy to find. He went in this direction, and then in that, seeming not to care or heed whither he was going, and at last his steps were turned in the direction of the Safe Retreat. He had been there many times each day since the girl had vanished, as to the altar which some heart-broken worshipper has raised to the memory of a lost saint. The memory of her

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presence seemed to sanctify the place. How often had they been there together! His feet kept step with hers as he followed her down the narrow, winding path. He went down it then without aim or design, with a feeling on him that he must go somewhere; and when he gained the grassy hollow at the end he found her lying on the ground. At first he thought his imagination must be playing him a trick—it had played him more than one of late. Then he held his breath and gazed. His heart seemed to stand still. Something seemed all at once to have happened to the world.

She was lying on her face, in a frock of russet brown. He had told her once, jestingly, that each fresh colour she wore he thought became her best; but he was almost sure that the best of all the best was russet brown. It went so well with the tint of her hair, her fair skin, with all sorts of things. And there she lay, upon her face, in a russet frock, and never moved. It was she. It was not, this time, a trick of the imagination. How came she to be there? What was the cause of her attitude, her silence? What was the matter? Was she sleeping? Was she hurt? Had she stumbled, and lain where she had fallen? Or was she—— No, he would not even ask himself if she was dead. He called to her:

“Alice!”

It was the first time that he had addressed her by her Christian name; perhaps that was why it acted on her as if it were some magic spell. In an instant,

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with the suppleness of youth, with a single movement, which was so rapid that one could scarcely follow it, she was on her feet, and, turning, saw him.

It seemed possible that, as had been the case with him, her first thought was that he might be the creature of a dream. She stood still, as if afraid that a movement might cause the dream to vanish. He stood still also; why, he only knew. Then, as if drawn by some irresistible magnet, he went farther down, she came towards him, and—he had her in his arms. He had vowed to himself over and over again that under no circumstances whatever would he sully this young girl by so much as a touch; he had been vowing it to himself only half a dozen seconds ago; now he had her in his arms and pressed her close.

And she had her arms about his neck, her head upon his shoulder. How she trembled, quivering and shivering so that he had to hold her tighter to keep her safe. How long they stayed like that, incapable of speech, incapable of anything but what they did, they never knew. The spell was broken by her utterance of what she supposed to be his name. There came from her first a long sigh, which seemed to bear with it a burden from the bosom. Then she whispered "Robert!"—as if she cried to him.

It was not only not his own name, it was one which he disliked. It was a note of pathos, fortu-

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nately sounded just in time to make him realise how fate or circumstance had caused him to fall away from the high standard which he had set himself. He relaxed his hold; and, as if it were a signal, instantly he became conscious that she was crying, that her whole body was being shaken by her sobs. What was he to do? Few men know how to manage women when they weep, a young man scarcely ever. This young man had very seldom seen a woman cry. His feeling as he realised her state was almost one of fear. He had to continue his hold, if only to support and comfort her. When he tried to soothe her with words, his voice seemed forced and harsh and broken.

"What is the matter? Tell me. Are you hurt? What is wrong? Try not to cry. For God's sake, Alice, don't cry! You—you make it so hard for me."

Perhaps it was the appeal contained in the last words which influenced her more than anything else; the suggestion they conveyed that because things were hard with her they made it hard for him. She drew herself away a little, raised her head, and with the little, flimsy square of cambric which serves a woman as a handkerchief she did her best to dry her eyes.

"I'll—I'll try not to cry. I know it's silly, but—oh, if only you knew!"

And the floodgates were opened again. He stood within a foot of her, helpless; longing to take her

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in his arms again, conscious, even, that she was longing to come, yet straining every nerve to resist temptation.

"Alice!" The name came from him and left him dumb. Words would not come to him.

By degrees her crying grew less demonstrative; she began to try to gulp back her tears, to remove their traces from her cheeks. Then words came to her—of a kind; stammering words.

"My—my handkerchief's quite wet; it's—it's a silly little thing."

In an instant he had thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and was holding out his.

"Won't—won't you have mine? I—I think you'll find it all right."

She looked at the proffered handkerchief, and then at him; and she smiled, such a crooked, wavering, unhappy little smile.

"It's—it's very kind of you. I'd—like it very much—thank you."

She took it from his fingers. As she raised it to her eyes she turned away, as if to hide from him the havoc which had been made. Still tongue-tied, he continued to watch her, some instinct telling him that the first words had better come from her, lest the intensity of his sympathy, born of his passionate love, constrained him to commit himself in a fashion which he might always regret. Presently she spoke again:

"I'm—I am afraid I've made myself a dreadful

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sight; tears never do become a woman, and they make me frightful. I don't know how it is, but they make me positively smudgy. I always have to wash my face before I'm fit to look at after crying."

"I assure you that—that there's no necessity for you to wash your face—just now."

She peeped at him over her shoulder, with a glance which was almost roguish. "What a silly thing to say. I couldn't wash my face here if I wanted to ever so much. How could I?"

"I'm—I'm sure I don't know. I only wanted to point out that I didn't—that I didn't think you need. I hope you are feeling better."

Possibly the last words were not so tactful as they might have been. The girl drew herself up straighter; her manner became more strained, with quite a different sort of constraint.

"Thank you, I never felt ill. I—I was in a little trouble, that's all."

"That's all? As if that wasn't everything; as if I wouldn't rather anything happened than that you should be in trouble! That's a very weak way of putting it; but the plain fact is that I'd give my life to save you from trouble. Not that my life is worth anything, anyhow."

She was still using his handkerchief as if it had been a towel; now she peeped over the top of it.

"Isn't it? Why isn't it worth anything? At any rate, it's worth more than mine. My life is worth so absolutely less than nothing that only a very

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little while ago I was thinking of committing suicide. I believe I should have done it, if there had been anything to do it with, just before you came; and—and before that, too.” Again her manner suddenly changed; it became quite warm. “What have you been doing since they took me away?”

“So they did take you away, did they? I thought so.”

“Of course they took me away. Do you think I should have gone if they hadn’t—at any rate, without telling you? You must think I’m a nice sort of person—I don’t know why.”

“Where did they take you?”

“They took me—I don’t know where they took me; they took me—— I’ll tell you all about it; at least I’ll try to, because things have happened to me which I don’t in the least understand, and I’ve been taken I really don’t know where, so I don’t suppose that what I’m going to tell you will seem very clear. That won’t be my fault, anyhow.”

She used his handkerchief to wipe away a final tear or two; there were little gasping sounds in her throat, as if she were struggling for composure, for breath enough to enable her to tell her story.

“Antoinette came to me in the middle of the night and told me to get up; and when I asked her why she wouldn’t answer, and she dressed me and took me downstairs. I was only half awake, and I was frightened by her manner, and—and I don’t know what; I was just awake enough to feel sure

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that something dreadful was going to happen. And when I got downstairs there was M. Perret——”

“The deuce there was! Where was the scoundrel? Was he alone?”

“He was in the hall. No, he wasn't alone. There were a whole lot of people there. I've not the faintest notion who they were. They seemed to have been fighting, and they were still quarrelling, shouting, and going on like anything. And when they saw me, some of them made a dash at me; and then the others made a dash, and I thought they would have torn me to pieces between them. And—and I screamed.”

“I heard you. I knew it was you I heard. Oh, if I had only been able to get at the blackguards!”

“You wouldn't have been able to do any good if you had—there were too many. I was so frightened that I couldn't imagine what they wanted. One half of them seemed to want to get me from the other half. I was quite sure that they were none of them my friends. Then Achille——”

“So Achille was there? The beauty! The liar! If I ever get a chance to get even with that gentleman!”

“He had a revolver in his hand. He pointed it at one of the men who was holding me by the arm, and told him that if he didn't let go of me he'd fire. I was terrified half out of my life, and I screamed again.”

“Oh, I heard you. Oh, yes, I heard you. But

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I was like a rat in a trap. They had fastened me in my room. I couldn't get out; I was helpless."

"I thought that he was going to fire at me, but he fired at the man instead, and hit him. I don't know where he hit him, but the man gave a great shout, and loosed hold of me, and went reeling across the hall; and I think he fell. Then his friends rushed at Achille, and he fired again, and hit two more of them—and oh, the noise they made! And in the confusion the others got me out of the hall. One of them picked me up and carried me as if I were a child. There was a motor-car outside the door, and they put me in it. Then all at once I became aware that Mme. de Constal was in the car, and she said: 'If you make that noise again, my child, I'll squeeze your windpipe!'"

"She said that? Really—Mme. de Constal?"

"She said it in a way—I don't want to exaggerate; I just want you to understand—she said it in a way which frightened me more than anything which had gone before. It frightened me into silence. So I sat still and never said a word, and the car started."

Her attitude suggested that in fancy she was living through that moment again, and those other moments which followed.

"The car went on and on; I thought it never would stop."

"Who was in the car with you besides Mme. de Constal?"

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"M. Perret, and a little wizened man whom he called Jules, but whom I afterwards heard him speak of as M. Monteil. M. Perret sat opposite me; and oh, if you only knew how careful I was to draw myself as far away from him as possible. I felt sure that it was all because of him that they were taking me away. And next to him was M. Monteil. It was quite a big car, and we were not at all in each other's way; there was room in it for more than four. I thought it never would stop; but at last it did, just as it was beginning to get day. I know we went through a gate, and along what I took to be a drive, and stopped at the door of what seemed to be a big house, and Mme. de Constal said: 'My child, we are arrived. If you are wise you will make no scene, and, above all, no noise; you have still your wind-pipe.' If I could only make you understand how she said it! I don't believe that, after all, I could have uttered a sound if I had tried. We all got out, and Mme. de Constal took my arm. I really needed it; I don't think I could have walked without; and she led me into a big, bare hall, up a flight of stairs, into a large, scantily furnished room, in which there was a bed and scarcely anything else. And she said: 'Now, my child, get into bed and sleep until I wake you. Shall I undress you, or will you undress yourself?' She began to undo my things and take them off. I don't believe I should have been able to undress without her help; I was in such a state of tremor; and I got between the sheets. She said:

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'Now stay there until I bring you your breakfast in the morning.' Then she went out of the room, and I heard her turn the key in the lock."

"You have no idea where this place was, or how far it was from here?"

"None. I can only tell you that we seemed to be hours in going, and that the car, which was a very big one, seemed to be going at top speed. We never stopped on the way. Of course, I never slept. I didn't even dare to close my eyes. I couldn't think where I was, or why I had been taken there, or what was going to happen. I was in such a state of terror that I could not think. I was only conscious that the presence of M. Perret in the house meant— Oh, I did not dare to try to think what it meant."

"You poor"—"darling" he was going to say, but he substituted "child." "And that scoundrel Achille wished me to believe that nothing had happened! I knew he lied."

"I don't know how long they left me the next morning. It had been daylight for a very long time when Mme. de Constal came with a cup of coffee."

"She brought it herself?"

"Oh, yes. At first I don't believe there was anyone in the house except her, and M. Perret, and M. Monteil, and perhaps the chauffeur, though I never saw a sign of him. She told me to get up and dress in the clothes I had come in. Then she took me to a room which seemed to be on the other side of the house, and she paused at the door, and she

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said: 'Now, my child, I must give you one word of advice. It is this: Don't be a fool. It is not necessary, because you are a young girl, that you should be a fool; I beg you to believe it. So, once more, my word of advice—don't be a fool.' She opened the door, and I went in, and the moment I was in she closed the door behind me, and again I heard her turn the key in the lock; and in the room there was no one but M. Perret."

CHAPTER XIV

ONE WAY OF LOVE

AT this point in her story the young lady's mood seemed once more to change. She straightened her back, raised her chin, clenched her fists, bore herself with what quite amounted to an air of defiance.

"The discovery that I was alone with M. Perret, with the door locked, had on me an effect on which I do not think he had counted. I fancy that he expected me to be cowed, broken, depressed, terrified out of my senses. I do not deny that I was afraid, but I flatter myself that I did not let him see it, because I was not only afraid, I was angry that he should dare to behave to me in such a way, a man to whom I had spoken with all possible plainness on so many occasions. So before he got a chance of speaking, I told him what I thought of him—I hope I'm not boring you with my story."

"Boring me? If you only knew how I hang on every word. What wouldn't I give to be left alone for half an hour with M. Perret?"

"I don't think you'd gain much if you were; he's taller than you, and broader; bigger altogether, and, I should say, much more used to fights and scenes and that sort of thing than you are."

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"He may be able to break me across his knee, but I should still like to have the chance of speaking my mind to him."

"I shouldn't wonder if you did; I think it's quite possible that he's coming here."

"You speak as if you would like him to come."

"I am perfectly indifferent, as, if you will let me get on with my story, I think you will understand. Directly I saw him I said: 'So it's you, once more; after the lots of times I've tried to be rid of you. You stay where you are, or you'll find that I am stronger than you suppose. I've got sharp nails, and if I should have to use them on your face, you'd bear the marks of them for many a day.' I could see he was taken aback; he had not expected that sort of address at all. He said, in his greasy way—whenever I have seen him he has always been either greasy or truculent; I don't know which way I like him least—'If Miss Hudson will take a chair, she will find that she has misunderstood the motive which has induced me to solicit this interview.' 'Solicit?' I said, 'I didn't know you had solicited it. If you had, I should have refused at once, so perhaps you will open that door.' 'I did not lock the door,' he said. 'It was Madame.' 'At your request, I have no doubt'—then we began to spar. I was getting angrier and angrier every moment."

The young lady stamped her foot, as if to give her audience an idea of the rage which had possessed her. Ronald Denton could not but feel that how-

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ever wildly her fury might have raged, such a person as she described M. Perret to be would scarcely have been awed, but as he noted the colour which came into her cheeks, and how her eyes sparkled, he told himself that rage became her.

"He began to tell me a long story, that man, which I am pretty nearly certain was all lies; how there was a shameful secret about my birth, which it was absolutely necessary to conceal; that the only way to do it was for me to get married; and that no one would marry me who knew the secret of my birth, except himself, because of the regard he had for me. So the old business began all over again—would I be his wife? I told him that I wouldn't, that I'd sooner drown, that I didn't believe a word he said, and that, so far as he was concerned, the only thing I wanted was never to see him again. This did not seem to please him."

"I'm surprised at that."

"You are laughing at me. Oh, you can laugh; but I can tell you I wasn't laughing then, nor was he. He actually began to call me names. He said I was a little idiot, actually! That I was incapable of understanding the meaning of my own words, or the integrity of his intentions, to say nothing of appreciating the honour he did me. And after a good deal of that sort of thing, and my storming at him back, he broke all at once into a white heat of passion, and, speaking much more quietly than he had been doing—he had been simply raving—he

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came to the point. He politely informed me that I was not going to leave that room until I had promised to be his wife; not only so, I was to marry him at once, as I gathered in the course of the next two or three days. All the arrangements for the marriage had been made; all that was required was that I should enact the part of the bride. We were to go for a honeymoon—he actually spoke of that!—to the Pyrenees; and then we were to return on a little visit to Madame de Constal at the Château d'Ernan, before entering into occupation of the house which he had provided for me in Paris. Wasn't that a programme?"

"Delightful. This M. Perret has a way of making his arrangements well in advance——" Leaving his sentence unfinished, Mr. Denton flew off at a tangent. "Wouldn't I like to kick him!"

"That's what I felt. But I didn't like to, considering his size and mine. He might have kicked back. He was quite capable of it. I told him that if that really was the state of affairs I should have to spend the rest of my life in that room, because never, never, never, would I consent to do what he wanted. He and Madame de Constal between them might kill me if they liked, but they'd never get from me a different answer. Then he made a dash at me, and I ran away. And he rushed after me. It was a big room, and there wasn't much furniture; but there was enough to help me to keep out of his reach. I was quicker than he was, and I knew that

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if he once got hold of me—I did not dare to think of what might happen if he once got hold of me.”

She was breathing great breaths. Ronald could see how her bosom rose and fell; the look of desperation which was in her eyes. With emotions to which he was incapable of giving utterance he saw with the eye of the mind the scene which she so vividly depicted. “There was a great, bare, heavy wooden table in the centre of the room. I got behind it. He chased me round, this way and that. I was too quick for him. He tried to get across at me, and under it. I always managed to keep out of his reach. The language which he used, and the rage that he got into! Then he gave the table a sudden push, and pushed me over. He rushed at me. I slipped under it, and was on the other side before he got to me. Then he dragged the table away, and stood it up on one side of the room, and I thought that I was done for. There was an old sideboard on one side, on which there were some plates, and glasses, and decanters, and odds and ends. I got to it, and, as he came, I threw a big dish at him with both hands, with all my might, and the edge of it struck him right across the face. You should have heard him yell. He put his handkerchief up to his face, and began to stamp about, and bellow and roar, saying that I had killed him, and that he’d kill me—and I hit him pretty badly, because the blood was all streaming down his cheek. Then he came at me again—such a sight, all covered with blood, and the

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blood still flowing; I believe he was half blinded with it. I threw at him everything there was time to throw—plates and glasses; then I tore away with a decanter in each hand. I hit him again with some of the things I had thrown—I don't know with what, and I don't know where, but you should have heard the noise he made; I declare he was like some wild beast beside itself with rage and pain."

The young lady paused as if to take breath. So excited was she that she might have been enacting her part in that strange contest again.

"Once more he came at me—a more dreadful sight than ever; the blood was still coming from wherever I had struck him on the face. It had got on to his clothes, his hands were wet with it. I was as mad as he was, though really inside me I was frightened nearly out of my life. I screamed at him: 'If you come near me I'll kill you with these decanters, I will, I will, I will!' I sprang to one side, and I hit him first with one decanter and then the other. I kept hitting him, and he kept coming after me. Then I didn't see where I was going, and I got into a corner of the room, and in spite of the decanters, one of which was broken, he got hold of me—and, oh dear, oh dear, how I screamed, and yelled, and struggled! I got the broken end of the decanter up against his face, and I cut him with it, I jabbed at him—and the roars he gave! He got me down on to the floor, and wrenched what was left of the decanter out of my hand, and I do

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believe he would have killed me, because I should have fought him while I had life. But just when I was expecting him to jab me with the jagged end of the decanter someone caught him by the arm, and there was Madame de Constal; and I realised that the door must have been unlocked while we were too much engaged to notice. Then there was a scene between them—shall I ever forget it!”

She held out her hands in front of her, as if calling Heaven to witness that she never could.

“He wanted to pay me out, and she wouldn’t let him. He was simply stark, staring mad. He called me the most frightful names, he swore he’d be revenged on me; and Madame de Constal caught him by the arm and told me to get up. I didn’t want telling twice. Jumping up, I tried to rush out of the room, but I couldn’t, because there was M. Monteil standing in the doorway. Although he seemed old and wizened, I had a feeling that he might prove more than I could tackle; that, in a way, he might prove more dangerous than M. Perret. And I dare say that I was not far wrong; for when M. Perret and Madame de Constal were fighting behind us—they were literally fighting—he said, quite quietly, ‘Madeline, come and look after this ——’ I won’t say what he called me; he meant me; ‘and I’ll attend to Léon.’ And somehow she got away from M. Perret, caught me by the shoulder, swung me out of the room, and just as M. Perret came raging after me M. Monteil slipped

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between us, and I heard him say—just as quietly as he had spoken to Madame de Constal, ‘You see this? If you move another step forward you will regret it, Léon.’ I saw that he was holding something up in his hand, but what it was I couldn’t see—it didn’t look as if it were a revolver, or any sort of weapon; but whatever it was, M. Perret knew, for he stopped dead. Madame de Constal tore me along the passage, to that bedroom, and when we had got there she looked at me, and she said: ‘Who would have thought there was so much of the devil in you? Perhaps, after all, you’re not so much of a fool as you look.’ And out she went and locked the door; and you can fancy the state of mind in which she left me. Though, as a matter of fact, I don’t believe that anyone could possibly do that. Oh, oh! when I think of it!”

“Had the blackguard hurt you?”

“I was bruised all over—I am now—when he caught me in his great hands; but I rather fancy that he was hurt more than I was.”

“I have heard that when it comes to the scratch women are pluckier than men; but I never knew what it meant till now.”

She stared at him as if his words were beyond her understanding.

“It wasn’t pluck! You don’t call that pluck? I would have run away from him for thousands of miles if I could have done it, but I couldn’t. There was nothing I could do except what I did. That

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isn't pluck. Even a tomtit will fight for its life; I fought for mine. If it hadn't been for Madame de Constal and M. Monteil he would have killed me, perhaps worse. But it's some consolation to think that so far I've hurt him more than he's hurt me."

"What happened next? Was that the last thing you saw of him?"

"I can't tell you what happened after I'd got out of that room, but I fancy there was a warm three-handed argument. No, I saw nothing of him again. They kept me locked up in the bedroom. In the middle of last night Madame de Constal woke me, as Antoinette had done before. I was taken downstairs, and there was the motor-car, and they brought me back to the Château d'Ernan; only this time we had the car to ourselves; it was better than when we went, but she never spoke a word to me the whole of the way. But what I can't understand is, what does it all mean? I don't believe a word of what he told me of the shameful secret connected with my birth."

She began to try, after a fashion of her own, to arrive at some solution of the mystery; while Ronald Denton continued to play the part of eager, interested listener.

"Of course, I can't remember being born, but I can remember nearly as far back. I was born in a little village in Sussex, called Steyning. My mother was staying with her parents, who were farmers. My father was away at sea. The farm was called Furnace Farm—in the old days when there were

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mines in Sussex, iron had been smelted there. I stayed there, off and on, till I was twelve years old. When I grew older I went for lessons to a Mrs. Adams, who took a few pupils in her old-fashioned house outside the village. When I was twelve years old my mother's father died. Her mother, who was an invalid, gave up the farm, and we went to live at Worthing. There my father's mother and sister came and took a house quite close to ours; my father, who was then in command of a steamer which went backwards and forwards from Morocco, the Canary Islands, and Madeira, kept coming and going. Then my mother's mother died, and within a week or two my father's mother. His sister came to live with us. She was the only relative who was left to him—I heard him say so over and over again—and my mother had no kin left in the world. Then my aunt, my father's sister, married an elderly person named Johnson; I was the only bridesmaid at the wedding. Not long afterwards both of them were killed in a railway accident in the North of England. I remember my mother going to identify the bodies. Then my mother and I were left alone, and we went to live in France so that I might learn French. Then my father fell out with the firm with whom he had been associated for years, and took service with another firm, who put him in command of a new ship, and his first voyage was his last. The ship went down in the Indian Ocean, and only five passengers lived to tell the tale."

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Again the girl stretched out her hands in front of her with that eloquent gesture of appeal.

"These are just plain facts, so where can M. Perret's mystery of my birth come in? I say it's just stuff and nonsense. And that makes it more mysterious still, for why can M. Perret be so anxious to marry me, and Madame de Constal take such extraordinary steps to help him? If it comes to that, why does Madame de Constal keep me in her house at all? I am quite sure that M. Perret doesn't care for me one scrap. I mayn't be absolutely ugly——"

"I shouldn't say myself that you were."

"You weren't asked. But if I were the most beautiful creature in the world, I don't believe that would be the least inducement to M. Perret when it came to his choosing a wife; and that it should be so strong an inducement as to make him behave as he has done—it's simply perfectly incredible. If you knew him you'd say so too. So we come back to the same point again—why does the man want to marry me, and what makes the woman so anxious to help him?"

A voice spoke—not in reply to her question—in harsh-sounding French. It would not have been easy for an unaided ear to decide what was the sex of the speaker.

"My dear Alice, I've been looking for you everywhere. Had you not better come up to the house—and M. Dennett?"

They looked round; above them, on the winding path, stood Madame Lamotte.

CHAPTER XV

A CONSULTATION

MME. DE CONSTAL was in her own private sitting-room. A very fine apartment it was. A lofty, arched ceiling, covered with allegorical paintings; walls panelled with fine old carved black oak; three deep, embrasured windows; rare and beautiful old furniture—hangings, pictures, curios, carpets; these things suggested an apartment in a palace rather than a mere sitting-room for a simple private lady. On one side of the room was a huge open fireplace, the opening measuring perhaps eight feet across. In front of it, at a table covered with papers and documents of the most business-like looking kind, sat the mistress of the castle. On one side of, but in the fireplace, stood a short, wiry, grizzle-headed man, whose cheeks were so lean as to be almost cadaverous. In a great arm-chair, on the opposite side of the table, was a big, burly, black-visaged man, whose head and features were almost hidden by wraps and bandages.

The little man in the fireplace was speaking; the whole conversation which is here reported being carried on in French.

"I can't stop, I daren't. It's no use talking,

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it's not a question of will or won't; it's just a question of can't. I've no wish for a further taste of New Caledonia, nor to exchange Noumea for Paris." His manner assumed a significance which was not altogether friendly. "There's another point. If I go, it won't be alone; I'll be something if I will. I'll not leave you here in clover."

"My dear Jules, why do you threaten us? It is in such bad taste, especially among friends." As she spoke, Madame de Constal trimmed the ash of her cigarette. "Say, in two words, exactly what it is you want."

"I can say it in one—money."

"It is true that that is only one word, but to explain what you mean by 'money' you will require to use at least one other. Having an eye upon the situation exactly as it is, what do you mean by 'money'?"

"Enough to live on, say a couple of years, until the storm has blown over."

"And what is your idea of living? One can live on twenty francs a week."

"You can't."

"I don't know; I think I might if I tried; you must not be too sure. I have done some very strange things."

"That's true—no one knows that better than I do—but you've never done that. The question I have to ask myself is, where shall I go, and how shall I get there? In these days of wireless messages

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it is not easy to go anywhere if the police have got their eyes widely enough open; and when you're there they can still bring you back. It so happens, however, that I'm not afraid either of the wireless or of being returned to the police, if I am relieved of all anxiety in the way of money."

"And how much will relieve you of all anxiety? Do not be afraid to be outspoken."

The grimace which distorted the man's lean visage might have been meant for a smile.

"You have never been able to bring an accusation against me on that score. It is not that I am afraid, or nervous; it is simply that the question is not an easy one to answer. I should like a hundred thousand pounds."

"No doubt you would also like the moon."

"Not long ago it seemed assured that I should get at least that sum."

"It is not long ago; now you are certain that you won't. Your ingenious little scheme has failed; you must remember that its failure has meant loss to me."

"How many other 'ingenious little schemes,' as you phrase it, have you got? How many of them are likely to be successful? How many are being successful every day? You gain a hundred francs for every one you lose."

"You are mistaken. At the present moment I am actually pressed for money."

"I believe it!" The man gave vent to a sound

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which might have been meant for a laugh. "You pressed for money! I never knew a time when, according to you, you were not pressed for money—when you had sacks full."

"If it pleases you to think so, my dear Jules, I would not destroy one of your delusions. Let us come to the point. I will make an effort; I will let you have a thousand pounds."

"You will let me have five thousand."

"It is impossible."

"You will let me have five thousand pounds within a week. At the end of that time my arrangements will be made. You will give me the money and all will be well; you will not let me have the money, and all will not be well. It is not that I threaten, you know better. I must lie by for at least two years; that cannot be done, with absolute safety, on less than five thousand pounds. If the police take me, because you do not think it worth your while to assure my safety, their catch will not only consist of one."

"Let him have the money." The voice came from the man with the bandaged head, who sat in the great arm-chair.

The lady said, as she lit one cigarette with the butt of another: "It's very easy for you to talk, my dear Léon, but how's the money to be found?" She tossed the finished cigarette into the fire.

The big man continued, speaking with a curious gruffness:

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"There is something in what he says; I doubt if what he speaks of can be done on less. Let him have the money."

The lady sighed. Leaning back on her chair, she looked up at the gods and goddesses above her on the ceiling.

"Very well; if I must I suppose I must, but I give you my word that I could as soon fly as give anyone five thousand pounds now. I doubt if, in spite of what Jules says, I have five hundred pence in actual cash. But this I will say, I will endeavour to find the money within a week. Suppose, Jules, the sum is a little short; cannot the balance be sent to you afterwards?"

"It cannot. I propose to be safe from you as well as from the police; for two years no one shall know my address except myself. Then, perhaps, it may be discreet for me to re-enter the world. But I must have every farthing of five thousand pounds by this day week, and that is putting it off to the very last moment. I do not think I can complete my arrangements in less time; if I do, it would be prudent for you to have the money ready the moment I am. Also another word. Although, for all our sakes, it will be the part of wisdom that you shall not know my address, I shall know yours. I am almost as well acquainted with some of your little schemes as you are yourself. You will not forget that in some of them I am a partner. You will not forget that after the two years have gone?"

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"What do you mean by that? Am I a safe person to threaten, or an easy one to blackmail? Do you know so little of me as that?"

"I repeat that I do not threaten; I merely remind you, that is all. We have been good friends and colleagues so long that I do not wish, since it is possible that we shall not see each other again for two years, to say one word which could make my memory, to you, a bitter one. I but remind you, that is all."

When the little man had not only come out of the fireplace, but left the room, Mme. de Constal had a long and rather interesting conversation with the bandaged gentleman in the chair.

"It's all very well for you," she began, "to talk of finding five thousand pounds within a week, but how do you suppose I'm going to do it?"

"There is no necessity that you should do it if you can't. All that was necessary was that you should promise."

His words must have conveyed a meaning which was not on the surface, or Mme. de Constal would scarcely have looked at him with such a sudden, startled stare.

"Léon Perret! Not that; never again. I've had enough."

"I also have had enough; do I not look it?" He gave his head a twitching movement, as if he were in pain. "You move too fast. I suggest nothing. There are two things we cannot afford—

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one that the police should take Jules Monteil, the other that he should try to make his peace with them by letting them take us. To save us from either of these misfortunes five thousand pounds would be cheap. We will get him the five thousand pounds if we can; if we can't—well——”

Mme. de Constal got up quickly from her chair.

“I will not have you finish your sentence. I tell you I will not; never again! There's Bébé; those friends of his should be worth more to us than five thousand pounds.”

“That's what I have in my mind. Why so excited? This American—this George P. Stacey—he's a millionaire; his wife is also rich; it seems it is not certain which is the bigger fool of the two. Then this Englishman—this Augustus Chorlston—his income, they say, is a hundred thousand pounds a year. You are going to have a very nice house party, my dear Madeline.”

“You do not suppose that five thousand pounds is all that is wanted?”

“I do not suppose anything so foolish. We want all that we can get, and the intention is to get it.”

She stood by the great fireplace, her skirts drawn aside with her left hand, kicking the flaming logs with the tip of her shoe. She looked down, as if to read something which she saw in the flames.

“You will do me the justice to admit that it is not my habit to look upon the black side of things,

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to expect bad luck. All the same, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that this is a hazardous experiment which we are about to make, with the assistance of our dear Girodet. Some of our best-timed coups have not come off recently. To illustrate that one need go no farther than your little affair with the Hudson girl."

"May the Hudson girl be dipped into boiling oil, and then thrown into a cauldron of molten lead!"

"What would be the good of that? What benefit should we receive? I cannot but feel, my dear Léon, that Miss Hudson has dealt a very serious blow to your self-conceit. There was a time, and, as Jules said, not so long ago, when you thought that no woman could resist you. She can."

The expression of so much of M. Perret's face as could be seen was of the most unpromising kind. His voice kept it company.

"Do you want to start afresh, to begin all over again? Why do you want to say to me a thing like that—now?"

"I do not want to say it, that is just the point, but one must recognise facts. It seemed so simple; according to you, it was so simple—you had but to marry this ignorant little piece of female flesh, and than that you said nothing could be easier, and we were on velvet. I intend no insinuations, but—well, we're not on velvet, neither you nor I. It does not look as if we ever shall be in that way. We have had our last throw, and lost. You might have killed

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her, but, as I said just now, how should we gain if you did that? No, Léon, you have had your innings, that is how the English put it; now comes the turn of the Englishman. He may put us on velvet after all."

She turned and confronted M. Perret. One of his eyes was prominent enough; a green shade protected the other. He pushed this shade aside. The pair eyed each other. Then he said, with a grin which made him seem more horrible than before :

"I am not sure that I would not rather he than I. One can buy a wife too dearly, as other men have found before me."

"Thank you, Léon, for the allusion. It becomes you."

She spoke with a smile which was even dangerously sweet.

"You gave me one, why shouldn't I give you another? When will you understand that you and I cannot afford to rap each other's knuckles?"

For some moments the pair eyed each other steadily. If they were trying to see which could stare at the other longest, he was the winner, since she was the first to yield. Returning to the table, she picked up a packet of papers, tied about with tape.

"Very well then, Léon, let's do it; let's be sensible children. Providence, after all, has her own way of doing things, as illustrated by the case of Ronald Denton. If Providence hadn't tossed him into our hands our position would be really serious; as it is

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we still have hope. With him as Alice Hudson's husband we shall be in almost as good a position as if you had married her yourself."

"And I shall be in a better. As I live, I'd sooner she were Mrs. Ronald Denton than Madame Léon Perret—that is, if you've got your facts all right. That is of the first importance."

"My facts are all right—they're here." She held up the packet of papers. "After all, the position has only assumed another phase. Pressure, persuasion—that is a better word—has only to be applied in a different direction—on the gentleman instead of on the lady. Mr. Ronald Denton has to marry Miss Alice Hudson; it is very essential to us that he should. I think that we have here certain little arguments which will persuade him."

"He won't need much persuasion if what you say is right."

"Léon, this young man worships the very ground she stands on; that's a well-worn statement, and in this case it's a true one, and because of it persuasion will be most needed. He loves this girl, and because he loves her he would do her no injury. He is under the impression that he would do her an injury by marrying her. So he will, the greatest injury a man can do a woman; how great an injury he does not even guess. It's our affair not to let him guess, and to make them man and wife before he has even a suspicion of the truth. Afterwards it will be easy."

"You are quite sure of that? We should be in

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a pretty situation if your calculations were to go astray."

"Sure?" She laughed. "I was never so sure of anything in all my life as that if we once get them safely married the rest will be easy sailing. You must take my word for it. She's as much in love with him as he is with her. She'd marry him to-morrow if she had the chance, and having married him, there's nothing she wouldn't do to save him from—well, we know what. The whole position is so droll. He loves her, she loves him; he does not wish to marry her because he fears that by marrying her he will do her an injury. I believe her love to be, in a sense, greater than his, because if I were to tell her the whole truth I believe that she would still marry him; perhaps all the more, in a spirit of self-sacrifice—she is that sort of creature! Having married him, the more of the truth I tell her, the greater sacrifice she will be willing to make for him. So that either way it will be all right for us. If he doesn't prove sufficiently pliable—and he's a mulish young gentleman, who, sooner or later will be sure to kick—when the time of his kicking comes, we've only to go to her to find her, where he's concerned, pliability itself. I know the girl right through. Being once his wife, she'll pay a thousand pounds to save his little finger from an ache; then what wouldn't she pay to save him—from we know what?"

"And she'll have something to pay with. Honestly, Madeline, it's not only because I'm a fox

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that's lost its tail that I'm become a philosopher; if the matter is only properly managed I would sooner it were marriage with him as husband than with me. If she were my wife, and I wanted a thousand pounds, I'd have to beat her before I got it; of that I'm pretty sure. And as for more——"

"And as for the—shall we say millions?—which we propose to get——"

"Don't make the fatal mistake at the beginning of letting your imagination run away with you. Don't begin by putting the figures too high. If, for our services in bringing these two together and seeing that they are properly joined, we get forty, thirty, even twenty thousand pounds a year, I shall consider that we are decently paid. I, for one, would not accuse them of ingratitude. Why, my dear, with a comfortable, regular little income like that, we might make of the Château d'Ernan—positively!—an asylum for the virtuous."

"No, my dear Léon, please not that—the virtuous are so dull."

"I have never had experience of them, so I cannot say."

"But I have, oh, I have." She raised her hands above her head with a gesture which was half sad, half bitter. "It is because I have known the virtuous so very, very well, that I am what I am. When I think of my long childhood spent with the good sisters in that dear convent, I tremble more at the memory than I think I should if I saw the guillotine."

CHAPTER XVI

A LOVER'S FRIEND

MME. DE CONSTAL and Alice Hudson were taking the air on the terrace. It was a fine broad terrace, from which one could see that the fresh green of early spring was making the country beautiful for miles around. The Frenchwoman was protected from the cool breeze by a long shawl which she wore over her head and shoulders; the girl had neither hat nor jacket. She was speaking very eagerly.

"I wish you'd let me go—oh, I wish you'd let me go out into the world and earn my own living. I am conscious of all you've done for me. I am really and truly grateful. I will do anything I can in the future to show it. But there is a point beyond which I cannot consent to take advantage of your kindness—of your charity, because it is charity."

"My dear child, cannot one do a kindness without being accused of charity. Your stay here has given me the greatest pleasure; I am sure that it will continue to do so."

The lady's tone was suave and smooth; the girl's, when she replied, as she instantly did, was all heat and excitement.

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"But I can't keep on staying here for ever. You are no relation of mine."

"I consider that I stand towards you in the place of a mother."

"Then you must forgive my saying that I don't. You are not treating me, you haven't treated me, as my mother would have done, I can assure you. While you have loaded me with kindnesses in one direction—kindnesses which I didn't want and would rather have been without—in another, well, you know how unkind you've been in another."

"My dear Alice, it is the privilege of youth to be hot-blooded; but when you accuse me of unkindness, even you in your cooler moments will realise how unkind that is. I have simply sought to establish you in life, to provide you with a home, a position, and a husband."

The girl's tone was scornful. "Is that all you have done?"

"Absolutely all. When I perceived that the husband I proposed was distasteful to you——"

"You perceived that long ago; long before you took me, in the middle of the night, to that lonely house, in which you thought that I should be helpless and at the mercy of that horrible man. Oh, when I think of it!"

As she clenched her fists a wave of emotion seemed to pass over the girl. Mme. de Constal seemed to be amused.

A Lover's Friend

"Then don't think of it; it is easily done. Think of something else; and let me tell you what."

They had gained the parapet on which the young man and woman had been on the afternoon of their first meeting. Mme. de Constal, seating herself on it, observed the girl's white face and the strained look in her eyes. Her tone could scarcely have been more kindly; she seemed to speak with genuine emotion.

"Alice, if you only knew how great, throughout all, my anxiety has been for you! We older folk are apt to think that we are wiser than you young ones. I thought I knew better than you the kind of man you ought to marry. You must remember that we in France have, in these matters, not the same point of view as you in England. I meant no harm. I would rather anything had happened than what has happened, especially as you have shown that you are wiser than I. Alice, what about Mr. Robert Dennett?"

The speaker put out her hand to touch, as it might have been with a caress, some bows of ribbon which ornamented the girl's blouse. All at once Alice's white cheeks flamed red, and she moved back as if to draw herself out of the other's reach.

"Mme. de Constal! What do you mean?"

"The poor fellow is head over heels in love with you; that's what I mean. I hope you're not going to be as hard to him as to the other."

"Has Mr. Dennett spoken to you—about me?"

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What has he spoken to you about?" The cheeks which a moment ago were without colour were now bright scarlet.

"Mr. Dennett has not said a word to me about you, or about anything. But I have two eyes. He is fading away for the love of you."

"I wish you wouldn't speak to me like that. I would much rather you didn't. I feel sure that you—you exaggerate; and, anyhow, it's not at all the sort of thing I care to talk to you about, if—if you don't mind."

"I don't mind; I mind nothing which makes for your happiness. Only—I wanted to say just half a dozen words, that's all. I don't know what you've told him about yourself."

"I've told him everything—everything there is to tell; everything, that is, so far as I know it. I've concealed nothing. Why should I?"

"As you say, why should you? I don't wonder he's so deeply in love with you, poor fellow."

"Why do you speak of him like that? In what sense is he a poor fellow?"

"I think when a man's in love with a woman, dying for love of her, and dare not tell her so for fear—of her being unkind—I think he's to be pitied, don't you? Dear Alice, I don't wish to meddle in your private concerns, nor to intrude myself upon your confidence; I just want to say this. Mr. Dennett has known trouble; not the same as yours, but—worse trouble; of a kind on which he does not like

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to touch; of a kind of which he never wishes to speak, or anyone else to hint at. You say you have told him everything about yourself. His is a very sensitive, a very noble, a very chivalrous nature. He does not care to tell you everything about himself. Has he told you very much?"

"He has told me nothing. I could see he was in trouble; I knew it the first time I saw him."

"You have very quick eyes, Alice. He has known the kind of trouble which turns a young man into an old one. It has nothing to do with women, my dear."

"You are sure of that? Not that it matters, but——"

"You needn't finish, my dear; I am quite sure. I dare say you are the first woman with whom he has been on terms of—shall I say, friendship? I am certain that you are the first woman with whom he has ever been in love."

"You are not to say that he's in love with me. You are not to. I'd rather you didn't."

"I fancy he thinks that you'd rather he did not say so, either; haven't you given him that impression?"

"I—I never have." The girl seemed to hold her breath, as if afraid of words coming from her against her will.

"I fancy that is what he does think, anyhow, and that's the trouble; that's what's making him unhappy."

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"Is he unhappy? How do you know he is? I mean, unhappier than usual?"

"Can't you see for yourself he is? Are you so blind?"

"I—I wondered; I thought he seemed a little strange."

"A little strange! That's how she speaks of it! But I don't want to keep you, to bore you by interfering in what you no doubt think is no affair of mine, only—I've still got those half-dozen words to say. Alice, you're not very rich; and he isn't either. I don't want that to stand in the way of your happiness, as that sort of thing so often does stand. I know that Mr. Dennett loves you—I know it, if you don't. He's a young man in whom I have confidence. I believe that he would make you happy. If you can find somewhere in the corner of your heart a little tenderness for him, I'll make marriage easy. I'm not a poor woman. I have no one to spend my money on except myself; it will give me great pleasure to invest some of it in you. You will be quite at liberty to regard it as an investment, and to return capital, with interest, when you choose. The day you marry Robert Dennett I will settle on you a sum which will provide you with an income of a thousand pounds a year. You will be able to live on that, you two. I make one proviso. I know that the gentleman is filled with desire for you. He will ask you to be his wife the first time he finds his courage. If you say 'Yes,' I should like you to be

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married very soon. I am presently shutting up the château, and am proposing to myself a trip round the world. I may be away two, three, four years. I ask that before I go you will give me the happiness of seeing you married; that is my proviso."

To say that the girl was moved by what the woman said would be to say nothing. Surprise, gratitude, shyness, wonder—these were but some of the emotions which so possessed her as to make her for some seconds speechless. Then, on a sudden, tears came into her eyes and words began to tremble on her lips.

"Oh, Mme. de Constal, if you only knew how—how ashamed I am, how—how conscious of your kindness, how—how perfectly incapable of telling you what I feel——"

"That's right, my dear, don't you try to tell me what you feel; I'll take all that for granted. Now I've said my half a dozen words, you think them over, and weigh them well. When the poor young man takes courage, don't you discourage him. I've all sorts of matters of my own to occupy my attention; suppose you run away and play."

CHAPTER XVII

OVERHEARD

ON the afternoon of the same day, luncheon having intervened, Mme. de Constal had a tête-à-tête interview with Ronald Denton in the oak-panelled room which opened off the hall—not the first similar interview they had had in that apartment.

"I suppose," began the lady, "Alice has told you about her little adventure of a few days ago."

"Little adventure, you call it. 'Are you referring to the shameful way in which Miss Hudson was dragged out of her bed in the dead of night, and the whole scandalous rest of the miserable story? You may be a woman, Mme. de Constal——'"

"There's no may about it, Mr. Dennett; I am—I assure you."

"Then you're a woman of, thank God! a very rare kind, because you deserve whipping for the part you took in the monstrous affair. As for the cowardly blackguard who calls himself Perret, if every bone in his body were broken he still ought to consider himself lightly punished."

"You're a pretty blustering youth," she laughed, as if neither hurt nor offended, "but that's a fault I

Overheard

find with you—you're merely blusterous, no more. You do nothing—merely bluster."

"Situated as I am, what can I do? That night you took care I was made fast in my room before you began to play your infernal tricks."

"Even situated as you are, there's one thing you can do, Mr. Dennett; you can protect Alice Hudson."

"How on earth can I do that?"

"By making her your wife, as I've already pointed out to you."

"You have the assurance to pretend—to me!—that that would be protecting her? To marry her to a wretch who has been guilty of a crime for which, at the very first opportunity, the law means to make him pay with his life?"

"I do not suggest that, were matters other than they are, the young lady might not be protected in some more satisfactory fashion, though I'm not so sure of that, since she's sick with love for you and you're dying for love of her. We are dealing, not with an ideal, but with an actual state of things. The girl is not in a much better position than you are."

"You dare to say it! And you expect me to keep silent!"

"My good Mr. Dennett, I would dare a great deal more than that, as you are perfectly well aware. I say that the girl is not in a much better position than you are, and she isn't. Léon Perret wanted to

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marry her because he's an old fool. Old fools with money will persist in wanting to marry young girls with none. Some other Léon Perret with money might be willing to marry Alice Hudson, but I doubt if anybody else would. Don't interrupt, let me go on. As I have already told you, Ronald Denton is dead. Robert Dennett has nothing against him, and never will have. My proposal is: marry Alice. Don't interrupt, I say! Take her abroad, say to South America, to the Argentine, the country of the future. I will provide you with the means. There go into business—you shall have sufficient capital. You are not a fool; you will make money—there it is easily made—you will return me what I advance, with thumping interest, you will be a respectable citizen, a man of property, looked up to. Alice will be happy; what more could you want—or she?"

He strode about the room, restlessly, as if he found it impossible to remain quiescent.

"I don't say that the prospect which your words hold out is not alluring—it is. Were I a decent man, with clean hands, I could, and would, desire nothing better."

"You are a decent man. What bombastic sort of stuff you do seem to like to talk. 'As I said, you just bluster. I've been making inquiries into the history of the late Robert Denton, and nothing is more certain than that even he was a decent man. It seems that he and a Mr. Edward Osborne were solicitors. Ronald Denton's father was the head of

Overheard

the firm. When he died he left what he had to his son, who in his turn became head of the firm. The son was very young; he did as young men will do—he spent money, he had a good time, he left the conduct of the business to Mr. Osborne. One day he and Osborne had a violent quarrel. After he left the office it was found that Osborne was dead. Had the young man not been a fool, he would have stopped to explain, but he was a fool; he did not stop. He—I'm afraid I shall have to say it—he ran away. Having blustered to some purpose, he took to his heels."

The lady paused. Her listener had sat down, and, resting his elbows on the table, had covered his face with his hands. Since his shoulders were shaking, one might almost suspect his reason. Mme. de Constal, leaning forward on her favourite couch, was regarding him with an expression which was suggestive neither of kindness nor of sympathy. Her lips were parted in what was rather a cruel grin than a smile, and in her eyes was something which went well with the grin.

Yet Mme. de Constal's tone, when she continued to speak, could not have been more suave.

"One may be decent, even if one is a fool—it certainly seems that Ronald Denton was. If one has an argument with a man, and he gets hurt, who thinks anything of that? My good Mr. Dennett, if I had had a daughter of my own, I would certainly not have objected to her marrying Ronald Denton

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merely because, once in his life, he showed himself to have been possessed—of courage.”

“Where did you learn these things?”

“It is quite easy to learn such things in England. What does it matter where I learnt them? The point is—I have. You do not suppose that I would allow a person whose acquaintance I made under such circumstances as I made yours to continue an inmate of my house and an associate of a young girl in whom I take an interest without endeavouring to learn at least something of his character. The conclusion at which I have arrived is that, on the whole, you are a person deserving of sympathy rather than reprobation. In France duels are quite common; we think nothing of a man who is the sole survivor of an argument which he has had with another. I am anxious, for reasons of my own, to get Miss Hudson married. For one thing, I am going to give up this house and travel. I should like her to be married before I start. The only obstacle which appears to me to be of the least account is that you both lack money. I have a considerable sum of yours in my keeping; to that I am willing to add more. Come, be sensible. Ask her to marry you; she expects it; she longs for it. You will have treated her very badly if you don’t; and, since the thing most to be avoided is a long engagement, marry her in a week. I have friends who have great influence in the Argentine; all arrangements shall be made, your passage shall be booked, you will spend your

Overheard

honeymoon on the ship which takes you to Buenos Ayres, and on your arrival there settle down at once to a new and, I trust, a happier life. Where love is, there is a great deal. Since in your marriage there will certainly be plenty of love, I know no reason why there shouldn't be happiness. I wish I were your age, and in your shoes, or even Alice's. What have you to say to this little plan of mine? I offer you the equivalent of Paradise. One would think there was only one thing you could say. You should make a bow, your best, and say : ' Mme. de Constal, yes.' One word would be enough ; I should understand. I would bring you together ; you would take her for a walk in the grounds ; to-night you would be the happiest of men, and she would be happy, too."

"You almost persuade me."

"Almost? Why only almost?"

"I wonder if I went back to England, and were to give myself up, whether they would hang me?"

"Are you particularly anxious to try? You did not seem to be anxious on the first night on which I met you."

"Then I didn't understand. I thought that if I got away, was believed to be dead, I could start a new life; I could begin all over again with a clean sheet. Now I know that I never can do that."

"Why not? Lots of people have done so. Why not you?"

"Perhaps, as you put it just now, it's because

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I am a fool. It's no use talking of the past being behind me when it's with me all the time. Why, a dozen times a day, and often the whole night through, I can see Osborne's face; I have only to put out my hand to touch it, and I know he is dead."

"Which means that sometimes you get the blues in a peculiar form. Marry Alice, and the blues will vanish. Cease to be an egotist; be unselfish for once in your life, make her happy."

"I am afraid you and I are not likely to see that kind of thing from the same point of view. From my point of view, in marrying Alice I should be committing another crime—a second, greater than the first."

"I wonder"—Mme. de Constal spoke slowly, as if she were measuring her words, and as she spoke she watched him—"if it would be better if you were to tell her everything."

He gave a quick little movement, as though the proposition had startled him.

"Do you mean——" He stopped himself, throwing out his hands as if with a gesture of despair. "The same idea has occurred to me. Do you think it hasn't? I've racked my brain in search of some way out, and found none. Think, first of all, of what I should have to tell her; in what a mood I should be to ask her to be my wife when I had finished telling."

"I think it is not at all impossible that by that time she would ask you. Where you make your

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mistake is that you so continually run out of your reckoning. When a woman loves, she loves, not an abstraction, whether moral or immoral, but a man. I believe if you were going to the gallows to-morrow, Alice Hudson would marry you to-day."

"And what kind of a creature do you think I should be if I let her?"

"I'm quite sure that you'd never think of her even if you were at the foot of the gallows. So long as you died nicely and prettily you wouldn't care a rap for the broken-hearted woman you left behind. You are egotism run to seed. You pretend to love this girl; she wants to marry you. If your love were not the merest pretence, you'd do as she wants."

"I certainly would never marry her unless she knew the kind of creature I am. You may try to confuse the issue by throwing dust in my eyes, but I'm not such a villain."

"You'll never be able to marry her if she does know—from your own point of view—because if she knows and does not give you up at once to the police, according to the law of England, you will make her an accomplice, and if you ever did have to stand your trial she would be in the dock beside you. You wouldn't like that."

"Like it! What a phrase to use! No, Mme. de Constal, it's no good. You may use all the threats to me you choose; you may apply the thumbscrew in the dozen different ways of which I have no doubt you are mistress. You can, if you like, give me

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up to-morrow. I would give myself up if I could only escape from being held a prisoner at the Château d'Ernan. But so long as I live and keep my senses—such as they are—I'll never ask Alice Hudson to marry me, and I'll take the greatest care that by no subterfuge shall you, or your associates, force me to take her as a wife."

Something in his listener's attitude caused him to look round. There was Alice Hudson standing in the open doorway. Her face was white, her eyes seemed to be abnormally wide open, her voice was tremulous.

"I—I beg your pardon for coming in so quietly; I had no idea—that I should be interrupting you. But since I appear to be the subject of discussion, it is perhaps just as well that I have come." She looked at Denton, and a sudden blaze came into her eyes. "How dare you talk of me like that? Who are you that you should inform—this person—that you will never ask me to marry you, that you will never have me forced upon you as a wife? What have I done to deserve being spoken of like that? Have I deserved it? Answer me—have I deserved it?"

The man was more agitated than the girl. He perceived how hideously she was mistaking the position; how impossible it was to explain. He could only stammer :

"Alice——"

Stamping her foot, she stopped him at the be-

Overheard

ginning of his sentence, looking all at once like a young fury possessed.

"Don't you dare to speak to me like that—don't you dare! I could tear myself to pieces when I think what a fool you have made of me. That I should have so lowered myself as to give you a chance of making a fool of me." She addressed Mme. de Constal. "What pretty fairy tale was that which you were telling me this morning? What a simple innocent you must suppose me to be! How much amused you must have been at the thought that I was drinking in every word you said! To think that all the while you two should have been plotting together to make a fool of me! It's incredible. You told me that this gentleman—I presume you haven't forgotten it—was dying with love of me——"

"So I am. That's true enough."

She flashed a look at him. "Don't you dare to speak to me—don't you dare! I suppose"—to Mme. de Constal—"that you've been saying I'm dying for love of him. I don't know on what authority, but let me tell you that if I had to choose, I'd rather marry M. Perret than such a person as he is."

"Don't say that, Alice—for Heaven's sake don't say it even in jest. If I could only explain to you, if I could only make you understand——"

She cut him short, as if she tried to wither him with scorn.

"Haven't I forbidden you to speak to me? I

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can't prevent your speaking of me when my back is turned. I believe that a certain sort of man does say disgraceful things about women when their backs are turned, but address me when I am so unfortunate as to be in the same room with you, you shan't. I will leave you to finish your discussion about me with Mme. de Constal, with apologies for ever having interrupted."

She turned, and was already half out of the room when Mme. de Constal, taking her by the shoulders, had her back again, and stood against the door which she had closed.

"Alice, this won't do. You entirely misunderstood what Mr. Dennett was saying. What I told you this morning was perfectly true; the tip of your little finger is more precious to him than all the world besides. Here he is to answer for himself."

"One cannot help noticing how quick he is to speak. Will you be so good, Mme. de Constal, as to let me leave this room? I know you have peculiar ways of treating your guests. If you want to compel me to remain in the society of a person whom I—detest, you will; you have done so before. From your point of view the results will be no more satisfactory on this occasion than they were on that."

"Mr. Dennett, would you speak to this impetuous and, I am afraid, slightly wrong-headed young lady?"

"Is it necessary to remind you that I have forbidden him to speak to me, Mme. de Constal?"

Overheard

The gentleman spoke, his words showing that he was quite as capable of riding the high horse as the lady.

“I have no wish to speak to Miss Hudson against her wish, Mme. de Constal, nor to detain her against her will in the room in which I am. So you will be so good as either to let me out or her.”

For the first time since we have made her acquaintance, Mme. de Constal seemed to be on the verge of losing her temper. Then, as if she recognised how absurd such conduct on her part would be, she smiled instead.

“I suppose if you will be wrong-headed you will—the pair of you. ’Twas ever thus where lovers were concerned.”

“Don’t you dare to call us lovers, Mme. de Constal.” This was the girl.

“Why not, when you are? You love her, don’t you, Mr. Dennett?”

“That is apart from the question, Mme. de Constal.” The gentleman’s manner could scarcely have been stiffer.

The young lady struck in: “I suppose it’s no use asking you not to put a question of that sort in my presence, Mme. de Constal?”

“Not the slightest, because, after all, the question need not be put; the thing’s so obvious. It’s just as obvious that Mr. Dennett is your lover and that you are his. Why deny the noses on your faces?”

The young gentleman moved towards the door.

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"Mme. de Constal, be so good as to allow Miss Hudson to pass, please; if she wishes it, let her leave the room."

"I have only one remark to make; I hope that you will neither of you think that it's superfluous. Why you are making all this fuss is beyond my comprehension. You'll laugh at it yourselves one of these days, because as surely as you have each of you two eyes in your heads, so sure you are to marry each other. It is written in the skies, or, what is very much the same thing, in the book of fate, which is kept at the Château d'Ernan. That is the remark I wished to make, and now I've a question to add before the lady goes. Will it be convenient to you to be married within a week? You neither of you answer. Why, you geese, your answer is written on your faces. There's nothing, absolutely nothing, which you'd love better—so, relieving you of my presence, you shall have half an hour to talk it over together."

Opening the door, Mme. de Constal was through it; it was shut; they heard the key being turned in the lock on the other side.

CHAPTER XVIII

TÊTE-À-TÊTE

FOR some moments it would not have been easy to decide which of the pair looked the more foolish. Then, with the proverbial readiness of feminine wits, the lady was the first to regain at least an outward show of composure. She put to the man a question which was clearly intended to convey all the scorn at her command.

"Is this another little scene which you've arranged with your friend, Mme. de Constal? Do you pretend to insist upon her letting me go, which makes it seem that you are both surprised and disappointed when she goes herself, though I don't suppose you are either? What a very clever person you are, and what an obliging accomplice she is!"

By way of answer the gentleman went to the door, tried the handle, and found it locked—a discovery on which the lady commented.

"You are amazed, no doubt, to find that it really is locked, aren't you?"

The gentleman said nothing; he went to the window. It was a tall French window, of rather singular design. Innumerable scraps of variously shaped and coloured glass were set in leaden frames

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so as to form a pattern. The design might be effective after a fashion, but one could see nothing through the window, nor were the minute fragments of glass easily broken. The frame was secured in some manner which caused it to refuse to budge when the gentleman tried to turn the handle. Once more the lady favoured him with an accidental commentary.

"Isn't it extraordinary that the window won't open? You never guessed that it wouldn't, did you? Perhaps you don't know that that window is only a dummy, which serves as a sort of shutter, and is only shut when a gale is blowing, to keep the draught out, and that the real window is on the other side. You are much cleverer than M. Perret was. You do pretend to be surprised to find that I really am alone with you. He was so much more transparent. What an excellent conspirator you make. Now what are you doing?"

Ronald Denton was driving his shoulder against the window again and again, as if he hoped, by the force of the impact, to compel it to open. After a while he had to admit that the thing seemed hopeless; the window remained exactly as it was. He did not allow even his countenance to betray the fact, but he himself was bruised and sore. The lady returned to the attack.

"Isn't it astounding that it won't be persuaded? I believe the window would resist a battering-ram; since probably you were quite aware of this, how

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amazed you must be to find that it resists you. Perhaps that's because you are under the impression that nothing can resist you."

There was silence. Mr. Denton was looking round the room, as if in search of something which might be used to induce either the door or the window to give way.

"What are you looking for? How well you play your part. Hasn't she left anything which will help you to get out of the predicament you and she so carefully planned? How sad! There's a silver paper knife; you might force the window open with that. There's a brass poker, about as thin as your finger; wouldn't it do as a crowbar with which to attack the door? You think not? Are you giving up already? Do find something which will do. How long do you propose to keep me in here?"

There was no answer. The gentleman, being forced to the conclusion that there was nothing in sight which could be used for the purpose desired, leaned against a table, and, with folded arms, stared at the fire. The lady seemed to find neither his attitude nor his silence what she desired.

"Is that all the answer that you propose to make me? I asked how long do you propose to keep me here? Is it because I am to be kept here for ever that you decline to give me any information? Will you answer me?"

A note of angry impatience came into the lady's voice. Outwardly the gentleman remained unruffled.

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"You forbade me to speak to you."

"I did, and I do. But when I ask you a question, I expect you to answer. I don't call a mere answer to a question speaking to me." There was again silence. He remained with his arms crossed and his eyes on the fire. "Do you hear what I say to you? How long do you propose to keep me here? Answer at once."

"Your question is intended to be an insult. I cannot prevent your insulting me. I decline to gratify you by letting you know how much your insults hurt."

"Rubbish! Don't talk to me like that! As if I believed you!" The lady did what the gentleman had done some time before; she began to walk about the room. She continued to speak as she moved. "I wonder if you imagine that I'm taken in by your acting, that I believe for a single instant that it is not prearranged. What it is you propose to gain I cannot imagine. That you should turn out to be a confederate of Mme. de Constal's is so unexpected, so cruel, that it leaves me incapable of thought. That you should have been her spy, her thing, a male Mme. Lamotte! I suppose you have gone straight off and reported to her every word I've said to you?"

She paused; but if she expected him to speak she was disappointed. He never moved a muscle. She looked at him with flames in her lovely eyes.

"I am not in the least surprised that you should

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think it becomes you to insult me by treating me with contemptuous silence. Do you seriously wish me to believe that this situation was not prearranged? Will you tell me yes or no? Don't stand there as if you were made of wood—answer!”

“I repeat that your question is intended as an insult, and as such I decline to notice it.”

“Oh, you do, do you? Do you think that impresses me? Because if you do you're wrong. Did you tell Mme. de Constal everything she was to say to me this morning? Will you answer me?”

“You know perfectly well that every insult which you level at me is more discreditable to you than it can possibly be to me. You came into the room at an unfortunate moment. How much you heard me say I do not know; it is clear that what you did hear you misunderstood, and I regret to have to say that your conduct since forces me to the conclusion that you are perfectly well aware that you misunderstood.”

His sudden outburst seemed to take her aback. One might be excused for suspecting that it did not altogether displease her.

“Oh, indeed! That's the attitude you take up! You won't answer my question, but you prefer to talk to me like that instead. I will not lower myself by asking how you ever came to discuss me with Mme. de Constal at all?”

“I did not discuss you with her.”

“Of all the—— Well, as I don't wish to what

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you call insult you more than I can possibly help, I will merely ask what you have been doing with Mme. de Constal."

"Alice——"

"How dare you call me Alice? I never gave you permission to call me by my Christian name, and after what has happened, that you should venture—talk about insulting me!"

"I shall call you Alice, though possibly I shall never do so again. You know what you are to me. You know perfectly well that I love you——"

"You love me! I never heard of—of such—well, I won't say what."

Though the young lady spoke with unmistakable ferocity, the sparkle in her eyes was not all anger. The gentleman's calmness seemed to surprise her; he still leaned against the table with his arms folded, staring at the fire.

"To pretend that you do not know that I love you is unworthy. I believe I loved you that first afternoon on the terrace. My love for you has grown greater each day since."

"I never heard of such a thing in my life! After what I heard you tell Mme. de Constal! Then to expect me to believe that this isn't prearranged!"

"I love you, and you know I love you, and that's the trouble, because I shall never be able to ask you to be my wife."

"What do you mean? Are you—of course, it's no business of mine, and I do not wish you to sup-

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pose that I take the slightest interest in the matter—but do you happen to be married already?”

He did not even smile, as he very easily might have done at the singularity of the young lady's manner.

“I am not; I never met anyone whom I wished to marry until I met you, and that again is the trouble. I never should have told you that I loved you had you not heard what you did, and had not Mme. de Constal, for reasons which are beyond me, forced my hand; because not only am I not in a position to ask any woman to be my wife——”

“Because you are so poor?”

“That wouldn't stop me. I might overcome poverty. I would ask nothing better than to be allowed to do my best to earn a living for—for the woman I love. What stops me is something very different. A man who lies under sentence of death has no right to ask a woman to marry him, has he? I am like that man.”

“You are under sentence of death! What do you mean? Mme. de Constal told me you were in trouble, and I saw it for myself from the very first, I saw it in your eyes; but—tell me what you mean.”

“I did not mean to tell you as much as that, only circumstances have been too strong. I just want you to understand that I do love you, but that I am like that man. I should like you to think as well of me as you can.” For the first time he shifted his position; his manner changed; he seemed to make an

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effort to attain something like cheerfulness; he even smiled. "I give you my word not to refer to this subject again. But there is one thing which puzzles me more and more—the attitude of Mme. de Constal. I do not believe a word she says merely because she says it. I do not believe she is a person capable of a generous emotion. I believe she has a hidden purpose in everything she does and says, which makes this business so mysterious. First she wants to marry you to Perret, and goes a good long way in trying to make you; now she wants you to marry me, when she knows perfectly well that I should make you a worse husband even than M. Perret."

"I don't see how that can possibly be. I wish you'd be more open with me; more—more candid. I had no idea that you were so secretive."

"The conclusion to which one is driven is that Mme. de Constal has some very pressing and particular reason for wishing to marry you to someone, and it almost seems that the more ineligible the man, the better her purpose will be suited. Do you think that she has any reason for wishing to be—say, revenged on you, to do you an injury to gratify some special spite?"

"What reason can she possibly have? I have told you everything. I'm not like some people, I—I don't keep things back."

"Yet, since she must have a reason, one can only wonder in what direction to start to look for it. It is absurd to suppose that she wishes you well. She

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would never have tried to marry you first to Perret and then to me."

"I wish you wouldn't jump to conclusions, especially as you are perfectly well aware that they are founded on I don't know what."

"I lay awake half the night trying to think what can be at the back of the woman's mind. The first thing you have to do is to get away from the Château d'Ernan. She has not the slightest right to keep you here. She is utterly without excuse, and, in my opinion, you'd be better off, certainly much safer, outside this place, even though you had not a penny in your pocket. The woman's persistent efforts to do you the greatest wrong one woman can do another suggest to my mind an intention so sinister that I am half afraid to try to think what it can be."

"If I leave the Château d'Ernan, are you going to stop behind?"

"It doesn't matter in the least what becomes of me."

"Doesn't it? Then let me tell you—and you can think of me just what you please—that to my mind it matters as much what becomes of you as what becomes of me. I believe that you are in quite as much danger as I am; which to some extent, I am bound to say, you seem to realise. I mean nothing more than what I say, that you seem to be quite aware how dangerous it would be to marry me."

His eyes had gone back to the fire. For some moments there was silence as he watched the flames.

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When he did speak it was as if he was thinking aloud.

"Dangerous! What a word to use! One day—you will know——"

"What shall I know—one day? Why should I have to wait—for one day? I have kept nothing from you. Tell me now."

He sighed, as a man might do in whom hope was dead.

"If I had no more to tell you than you had to tell me you'd have heard it long ago, and I should be the happiest man in the world, instead of the unspeakable thing I am. If I tried to tell you, I couldn't get my lips to frame the words; they would fail me."

"One would think that something—something very dreadful—had happened in your life."

What he would have said if he had answered at all would not be easy to determine. For while he still stayed speechless, as if casting about his mind for something to say, the key was turned in the lock outside, and Mme. de Constal came into the room.

"Well," she said, with a smile of mischief in her eyes, "I hope you've pardoned me and forgiven each other. Have you had a pleasant half-hour? I see there is still a rift in the lute, but perhaps it's not quite so wide as when I saw you last. Come, children, we are altogether in one house, let's be as nice to each other as ever we can; it does make such a difference to the atmosphere. And there's another

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thing ; I'm going to have visitors, quite a large house party ; I want you to help me to entertain my guests. That isn't asking very much from you, is it, Mr. Dennett ? ”

“Do you think I am a fit and proper person to help you to entertain your guests, Mme. de Constal ? ”

“Perfectly ; why not ? If you choose to make yourself agreeable, I can think of no one who can do it better. And you, Alice ; there are some men coming as well as women. Can I count on you to help me to entertain ? Surely that's not asking too great a favour.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE TWO MEN

MME. DE CONSTAL was again in the great room with the painted ceiling. M. Léon Perret, with his bandaged head not quite so bandaged, was in the big arm-chair. Perched on a corner of a table, with an air of being very much at home, was the ineffable Achille; nothing in his voice, manner or bearing just then suggesting the immaculate valet de chambre. Leaning over the back of another arm-chair was a dark-haired damsel; like Achille, she also wore the uniform of her office, and was known in the establishment as Antoinette, being supposed to act as Mme. de Constal's own maid.

Mme. de Constal was less placid than usual. She spoke as one who was in a state of much irritation; indeed, she owned that she was.

"Things are getting beyond bearing. That there could be such fools in the world. I ought long ago to have become reconciled to the fact, but there are moments in which I still find it hard. Everything is going wrong. I am sure of it; I feel it in my bones. Here is Jules in a mess—for all his boasting; it seems that the police will take him, after all. If they do, it won't be long before——" She tossed up

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her hands. "I have no wish to anticipate the worst; it will come soon enough, anyhow."

"My dear Madeline, it seems to me that it's you, if you will allow me to say so with all possible courtesy, who are the fool. Achille and I are not as young as we were; we feel that this climate doesn't agree with us, nor even this continent. Surely we've earned a little repose?"

Since this speech was addressed to Mme. de Constal by Antoinette, it goes without saying that at that moment there was nothing about her which pointed to the subservient maid. Nor did madame, in her reply, suggest the mistress who resents undue familiarity.

"It's all very well for you to talk. You take yourself off, but what's to become of me? And as for what you call your share, I don't see where you're going to get it from. You know that I'm almost penniless."

"My dear Madeline, that's just what I don't know. It's no use your pretending to resent my not believing you, because I know you much too well to believe anything you say on your unsupported word alone. I have very little doubt that if you choose you can lay your hand on practically any sum you like. Achille and I are going to be married—it's time we were—we're going to retire from the firm. It's only right that you should give us what you promised—our fair share."

· "That means, I suppose, thousands of pounds."

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"It means—you know what it means. Why pretend that you don't?"

"I shall be only too glad if you are able to show where that sum of money is which you say I can lay my hands on."

"How about this girl, this Alice Hudson? I thought there was a gold mine in her." The speaker was Achille.

"So there is—an inexhaustible gold mine. But you know perfectly well that to get any mine into working order takes time. She wouldn't marry Léon here; she'll have to marry that young fool; but she is not easy to persuade; nor, for that matter, is he."

"Why you ever brought him here at all I can't understand. More than once I have been very near wringing his neck." This again was Achille.

"I dare say you don't understand; but I do. It is true he has not turned out exactly the kind of person I supposed him to be; but for our purpose I'm not sure that he's any the worse on that account. They are nearer marriage than either of them supposes; it is only a question of skilful driving. Once he has married her the working of the gold mine will begin. I don't think any of us will be dissatisfied with the profits. But what we want is time, a little patience, and a certain amount of common sense. Our first business, for our own sakes, is to see that Jules is safe; then, if you will only wait a little, you shall have all you want."

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"How often have you said that, just those three words—wait a little? Your little becomes so long."

"Here are all these people coming, with pockets bursting with money, and Girodet to help with them. When they go they ought to leave enough behind them to—go round. Directly they've gone, we'll put the finishing touches to those young fools. They can be married here in the house—they shall be. Leave all that to me. I can lay my fingers on the 'parson,' as in England they call the priest. In the meanwhile, Antoinette, will you do me the favour to see that everything is ready; and you, Achille, the same?"

When, not long afterwards, Antoinette and Achille having gone, the lady was alone with M. Perret, he said to her :

"Suppose those two refuse to marry to your order; they've been pretty obstreperous already; then what are you going to do? You know how she got the better of me. If this other plan of yours miscarries, what then?"

"We'll have them doctored, and they shall be married without their knowing it. I don't like that sort of thing, but——"

She finished her sentence with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Won't that be risky? Anyhow, would such a marriage be good?"

"Everything is risky; you and I ought to know that. We have taken much greater risks than that

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and come out on top. As for the marriage being good, it's only regard for her which holds him back. My dear Léon, you and I know how many ways there are of persuading a man to hang himself, and how we can hang him ourselves if all of them fail. Those two young people are going to be married, if they will or won't; and afterwards we'll begin to draw our dividends."

"There is another point. Suppose one of these people whom Girodet is bringing recognises him or her?"

"I am rather hoping that one of them will recognise him, in an uncertain sort of way; it would give the young gentleman a fright, which he stands very much in need of. He's begun almost to think himself safe. If it is suddenly brought home to him how very much he isn't, I shouldn't wonder if he becomes more pliable. As for recognising her, that's absurd. What is there to recognise? You need have no fear on that score. What worries me is an absurd sort of feeling I have that Bébé will make a mess of things; he's done it before, and he's not getting younger, or his fingers more agile."

"Maybe; but he's had so much practice that, older or younger, his fingers ought to be in training."

M. Perret said this with such a savage sneer that the lady looked at him, and as she looked, she laughed.

"You never did love Bébé; you are artists in such different ways. It isn't, either, exactly that I'm

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afraid of Bébé's failing, but he's bringing with him such a very mixed collection. I should like to have managed with one or two—the right ones—if that had been possible, but it wasn't. The very smallness of the number would attract suspicion. Where there are so many, what more natural than that one or two should lose, perhaps heavily, especially when some of the others may have won?"

"Then what worries you? I thought you prided yourself on never worrying. I don't know how it is, but you seem to me to be unlike yourself."

"Am I?" She gave herself a little shake. "Perhaps it's because I've eaten something which disagrees with me which needs correction." Going to a sideboard, she filled two liqueur glasses out of a decanter, returning with them in her fingers to the man in the chair. "Here, Léon, is one for you. Let's drink together to the success of my little undertaking, and couple with it a hope that nothing will spoil the pleasure of my guests."

Ronald Denton, wandering about the grounds alone, witnessed two incidents which made him think. He was not in the best of spirits, which means that he was in even a greater state of depression than he was wont to be. He missed the girl, the place seemed horrible without her. The reflection that in all probability she would never be his companion again made the matter worse. They certainly could never again meet on the old basis of happy innocence, of frank companionship. How happy he

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had been with her; he knew it at the time; the full measure of his happiness he only now began to realise.

There was nothing left in the world for him, nothing to keep him at the Château d'Ernan. He had never contemplated the possibility of getting away from it; the more or less vague consciousness that he was virtually a prisoner had been made bearable by the presence of Alice Hudson. All that being over—she would never walk by his side through those grounds again—the sooner he took himself outside them the better it would be. He did not think that would be difficult. If Mme. de Constal refused to open her gates and let him through, he had no doubt whatever that he would be able to get through them without her. What he was to do when he was on the other side was another matter; also the question was forced upon him of what would become of the girl when he had gone. What might not these creatures do to her?

He would have done his best to leave the château behind that very afternoon had not that reflection stayed him, that question to which he dared not find an answer. He would have, at least for the present, to remain where he was because of it. To take himself off would be to desert her; he certainly would be of no use to her outside. He was not sure that he would not walk to the first police station and give himself up; he obviously would not serve her by doing that. The thought of what might be happen-

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ing to her would make even the gallows doubly bitter.

So it came about that he was torn this way and that. While he was contending with himself those two incidents took place, one quickly following the other. On a sudden he became conscious of a distant sound. As a rule everything thereabouts was so still; the noise and bustle of the world was no doubt not far away, but no sound of it ever seemed to penetrate there. He stood to listen; what he heard was a motor-car, more than one. They were probably entering the long drive which ultimately led to the house. Possibly the guests of whom Mme. de Constal had spoken were arriving. He wondered what sort of persons they could be to come on a visit to that strange house. She had asked him to help her entertain them. In the request he fancied he saw a veiled threat. What were these people coming for? He could not imagine how, but that might mean more danger to Alice. He would stay and see.

While he stood listening and wondering, even more suddenly than he had heard the sound of the motors, he became conscious that he was not alone in the wood through which he had been picking his way. Someone was stealing through the brushwood which served as a fringe to the trees, someone who was so anxious to avoid notice that he bent down so low that Denton was half disposed to think that he must be moving on all fours. He told himself that he might be mistaken, that it might be an animal,

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not a man. Then he saw something pass out of the brushwood and, still bending low, run across the open intervening ground, and he knew it was a man.

What man it was, and why he was so desirous not to attract attention, he could not tell. He only saw him for a few seconds, then the man passed to another belt of trees which was beyond. Ronald had an idea that he was a short, elderly man, and he wore no covering on his head. The motors had ceased to be so obvious. Possibly they had drawn up at the front door, and the passengers were descending. Had this man, who seemed to be of so retiring a disposition, any connection with their arrival? And if so, what?

He was about to retrace his steps towards the house when he became aware of the presence of still another man. This one might have fallen from the skies; he could have sworn there was no one near him a few seconds ago, yet, as he moved forward, this person stepped from behind a tree. Ronald stopped; the stranger stopped also. He regarded Ronald attentively for several instants, and then, without a word, walked rapidly across the path among the trees on the other side. Ronald watched him moving. So far as he knew, he was a stranger at the Château d'Ernan. He certainly had not seen him there before. His impulse was to hail him, to ask him who he was and what he was doing there, but some instinct kept him silent. There was something in the appearance of the man, and in the manner in

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which he had regarded him, which made him unwilling to improve their acquaintance; something which in some subtle and most unpleasant fashion reminded him of Inspector Jenner. Even in those brief moments in which he had been in sight, he had been conscious that there was about him something of that air of calm, unconscious authority which had impressed him so disagreeably in the inspector.

He passed out of the wood, and walked rapidly back to the house. As he entered the hall he met his hostess, who greeted him with her sunniest smile. He was struck by the ease and grace with which she bore herself, and how well the gown she wore became her.

"They have all arrived," she said, "and they're nearly all compatriots of yours, because I always think that even an American is more than half an Englishman, though they never seem to like it if you hint as much. We dine in half an hour. You won't fail me? Alice has a headache, she will have to be excused; but on you I confidently count. Tell me that I may."

His reply, as it was apt to be when he spoke to his hostess, was more curt than courteous.

"I will endeavour to be ready for dinner in half an hour; you can count on me to that extent."

Without another word he walked past her up the stairs. She glanced after him, still smiling, though the words she muttered to herself were hardly gay ones :

"You little pig ! Also you little fool ! If you had

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only enough sense to cover a centime piece, you might have a much better time than you have any notion of, young imbecile ! ”

As she turned, Achille came out of a door on her left, with something in his bearing which seemed to strike her as unusual ; he hardly presented his wonted appearance of unruffled, even fathomless calm. Perhaps that was why she addressed him in a whisper.

“What is wrong?” It was in an even fainter whisper that he replied :

“Jules.”

“What’s the matter with Jules?”

“He’s come back. He’s here, in the house, and he’s made a fool of himself ! Come.”

“Must I come now? Each instant I expect those persons to descend.”

He repeated that one word, “Come !” He took her by the wrist, not familiarly or disrespectfully, but as if he were constrained to do so by something stronger than himself ; and he led her through the door by which he had come, along a passage, to a room at the other end, a room which might have been some sort of a servants’ hall. In it several persons were assembled. They stood about something which lay upon the floor.

“What’s the meaning of this?” demanded Mme. de Constal. “What are all you people doing here?” They drew aside to let her see that on the floor a man was lying. “Who’s this? What does it mean? What’s happened to him?” Then she perceived that

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on one side stood the grizzle-headed, lantern-jawed little man, who we saw before standing in the fireplace. "Jules! Why have you come back?" Suddenly she seemed to connect his reappearance with the man on the floor. She pointed with her finger. "Is this—what have you done to him?"

The little man snarled rather than spoke.

"I've killed him, that's what I've done!"

"Killed him?" The woman's tone was one of horror.

The little man, M. Jules Monteil, went on, as if excusing himself.

"He's the agent of police. It was either he or I. What more natural than that I should take care that it was he? Would he have considered me? No! Why, then, should I consider him?"

The person lying on the floor was the man who had appeared with such surprising suddenness from behind a tree, and had regarded Ronald Denton so attentively only a few minutes before in the wood.



CHAPTER XX

A DINNER PARTY

WHEN Ronald Denton came downstairs, dressed for dinner, he found Achille in the hall.

"Monsieur will find the company assembled in the red salon."

If there was anything peculiar in the man's manner, Denton did not notice it. The valet led him to an apartment which he had not before entered, and of whose existence he had been ignorant—a gorgeous chamber, whose walls were panelled in red silk, and in which all the furniture was gilt. There he found some half-dozen persons, who, apparently, were only waiting for his arrival to go into dinner. Mme. de Constal spoke to him across the room directly he appeared.

"Oh, Mr. Dennett, how naughty you are. We have been waiting for you." She went up to a tall and very smartly dressed young woman. "Will you permit me, Miss Chorlston, to introduce to you my very good friend, Mr. Robert Dennett? Miss Chorlston, Mr. Robert Dennett, whom you will please take in to dinner. You see we are following the English fashion."

The guests, led by Mme. de Constal on the arm

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of a very big and portly person, crossing the room, passed through a door on the other side into still another apartment which was strange to Denton. Sideboards ran nearly all round it. In the centre was a dining-table gleaming with linen, plate, and crystal. When the guests were seated, Denton looked around him.

Somehow, these were not the kind of people he had expected to see at all; their respectability seemed to be beyond all possible doubt. The individual who had brought the hostess in had it not only written large all over him, but there was that in his whole bearing which proclaimed a respectability of even an egregious kind. White-haired, white-bearded, red-cheeked, with his gold glasses straddling his nose, a single diamond stud on his expansive shirt front, his entire personality suggested an alderman and a City Father. Denton had an idea that he had seen him somewhere before.

"Have you been here long?" inquired the young lady at his side.

The question recalled him to a consciousness of her presence.

"Well, yes; I have been here some weeks."

"Then you know Mme. de Constal well?"

Finding the question a little difficult to answer, he glanced at the questioner. She was made on generous lines. Perhaps twenty-six or seven, at that stage of her career she might have been described as a "fine girl," in all probability she would be a much

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finer, and a much larger, woman in ten years' time.

"Not so very well." To avoid further awkward questions, he thought it wise to make inquiries of his own. "Have you come from London?"

"No, we've come from Nice." She looked about her at the others. "I think all of us have come from Nice. Some of us have been staying at the same hotel, where we met each other; when Mme. de Constal asked us to put in a couple of days on our way home mother made me come."

The sudden accent on the word "mother" struck the listener's ear.

"Has your mother come with you?"

"Rather. I am quite sure I shouldn't have come without her—to a house like this." The speaker smiled, a smile which, like herself, was on generous lines. "I don't wish to be rude, or silly, especially as you must be a friend of Mme. de Constal's since you've been staying here all that time, but you know what I mean."

Her listener did not know what she meant—he wondered. While he wondered she gave him some further information.

"That's mamma over there. Do you think there's any likeness?" She referred to a very stout lady who had been taken in by M. de Girodet, who seemed to be playing the part of host. She had grey hair, her jaw was square, she wore pince-nez, behind which were a pair of bright eyes, undimmed by age, which

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one felt sure took in all that was going on around her; evidently she was a lady who knew her own mind. "And that," continued Ronald's neighbour, "is papa." The allusion was to the gentleman who had gone in with Mme. de Constal. "I am sorry to say that I resemble both my parents, which is most unfortunate, because I'd rather not be like either. Anyhow, I'm not the least like them inside, whatever I may be out—that I believe I can assure you."

The remark, under the circumstances, seemed to the gentleman rather a singular one to make. Again he wondered what she meant.

"Do you know," he remarked, "that I've a sort of idea that I've seen your father somewhere before."

"You'd be a very singular person if you hadn't, either him or his portrait, considering his portrait appears, on an average, in at least twenty papers every week; and if his portrait isn't there, there's mother's. Once they got me—never again. If I had my way I'd make it illegal to publish a person's portrait anywhere without that person's permission. We ought to have the copyright of our own faces."

"May I ask what your father's name is?"

"Usual thing; one never does catch a person's name when one is introduced. I caught yours, but it's plain you didn't catch mine. Yours is Mr. Dennett—I noticed that Mme. de Constal called you Mr. Robert Dennett. I'm Miss Chorlston—Clarice my front name is. My father is Sir Augustus Chorlston. I have heard that he's the greatest dealer

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in toys in the world, and they made him a knight the year he was Lord Mayor. My mother, of course, is Lady Chorlston; you must have heard of Lady Chorlston, the famous philanthropist, who is always on the side of the oppressed. That's why we're here."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

The girl opened her eyes, as if in genuine surprise.

"You don't mean to say you don't know about Mme. de Constal?"

"What particular thing is it which I am supposed to know about Mme. de Constal?"

She glanced at him as if to see if he was joking. She lowered her voice, keeping her eyes on her plate.

"I don't know if you are serious—she's watching us with all her eyes—anyhow, it's not quite the sort of thing to talk about at her own table." With surprising ease she changed the subject. "They keep a very good cook here, and what a magnificent place this seems to be. I had no idea it was such a fine one."

All at once Ronald found himself addressed by a gentleman who was on the other side of the table, a youngish man with a clean-shaven face and an air as of one who had been born tired, and an accent which betrayed the country of his origin.

"Do you know, sir, that I've seen you once before, under circumstances which have caused your face to linger in my memory?"

"I saw you also, and I wanted to tell you so, but so far you haven't given me a chance."

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This remark came from his neighbour on the other side, a very little, a very pretty, and a well-dressed woman, who looked as if she were not much more than a child. Ronald, taken rather aback, glanced from one to the other. He tried to recall their faces, but in vain.

"I am afraid you have the advantage of me. I'm afraid I don't remember seeing either of you before." He glanced at the lady. "And if I had seen you, it isn't likely that I should have forgotten."

"Bravo, Mr. Dennett." Mme. de Constal's voice came from the other end of the table. "It is not often that Mr. Dennett pays a compliment; I suspect it's a thing he does with difficulty. He's never paid me one in the whole of his life."

"I don't know where I got the idea," the little lady continued, "but I know I did get the idea from somewhere that your name wasn't Dennett. I can't think what I was told it was, but I know it wasn't Dennett."

Ronald wondered whether the sense of shock with which he heard her made itself visible on his face. He tried to make his attention to his food, which he found it almost impossible to swallow, an excuse to leave her words unanswered. The gentleman at the other side of the table went on :

"It was in the rooms at Monte that my wife and I saw you one afternoon. You were backing red, and as we were backing black, and red kept on winning, and you went away with a pile, and we left our

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pile behind us—that's how your face got stuck in our heads."

"There was a girl beside you whom we knew slightly, and we asked her who you were, and I know she told us your name, and while I can't think what it was, I don't think it was Dennett. Do you know what it was?"

She asked the question of the man on the other side.

"I do not; I don't know that I ever heard. That wasn't the part that interested me. Have you been backing the red again, Mr. Dennett? I looked for you in the rooms once or twice, but I never saw you."

"I can't say that I've been backing anything very much since that afternoon."

He wondered if his voice sounded as strange to others as it sounded to himself. The whole scene which their words recalled came back to him. That was the last day of his freedom. Elsie Moore had stood beside him, taking the keenest interest in the way he was winning. For the moment he had forgotten the haunting shadow, to have it suddenly recalled to him as he quitted the rooms with his winnings in his pockets. Inspector Jenner had met him in the doorway; he had wondered if Miss Moore had seen the meeting—he wondered still. These things seemed to have belonged to a life which he had done with years ago. It was with the strangest sensations that he had it recalled to him how little distance of time away they were.

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The conversation turned upon playing, Lady Chorlston making a singular pronouncement.

"I have always felt that since everyone spoke evil against the rooms at Monte Carlo, there must be something good about them, in such circumstances there generally is—at least, that has been my experience, and my experience has been considerable. Therefore I went to Monte Carlo, for the first time in my life, with an open mind. I regret to say that I have come away convinced that, for once in a way, the voice of calumny is the voice of truth, and that nothing can be said for them."

"Lady Chorlston lost nearly ten thousand pounds at Monte Carlo."

This was Sir Augustus Chorlston. He made the announcement, not only as if it were a matter of public interest, but as if it were one of which to be proud. The stout lady corroborated him.

"Yes, ten thousand pounds, close on; that is the amount which I lost in the rooms of the establishment at Monte Carlo. As I said, I went there with an open mind, and I gave them a fair hearing. I played there nearly every afternoon and evening during a stay of close upon two months, and not on one occasion did I win."

"That, mamma," observed her daughter, "was because you played so absurdly. If you had only done as I advised, you'd have won over and over again, but you wouldn't, so you lost. I can't think what you have to grumble at."

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"I do not grumble." Her ladyship's manner was portentous. "I merely state a fact. I say that if a person plays twice a day for two consecutive months, and never wins once, that proves that the whole system is criminally bad, and if I had my way I'd shut it up to-morrow."

"That may be all right for you, but for me—how does it work? I came away nearly three thousand to the good. You can't expect me to see nothing but evil in an establishment which treats me like that."

This remark came from a short, plump individual with black eyes, a big nose, and crisp, curly hair.

"Possibly, Mr. Krauss," observed Sir Augustus, "there is a substratum of truth in what my daughter says, and it is well to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of what to back and when to back it. I confess that I think Lady Chorlston takes the matter too seriously. I am no gambler, but when I do gamble I quite realise that I am gambling, and I don't howl when I lose."

"Are you suggesting, Augustus, that I howl?"

"Not at all, my dear, not in the least. But it seems to me that your argument about the pernicious nature of the establishment at Monte Carlo cuts both ways. It was true that you lost nearly ten thousand pounds, but I won nearly five. If that proves anything, what does it prove?"

"I should say, Chorlston, that it proves that you are the sort of person the management thanks its stars is not so common as he might be. If you won

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five thousand, and I won three, I don't see that the establishment comes off unduly well, even though her ladyship lost ten."

"We," exclaimed the little lady at Denton's side, "lost twenty."

"Yes," explained the gentleman on the other side, "we left a hundred thousand good American dollars in return for hospitality received."

"That only shows," Lady Chorlston declared, "what a system of villainy it all is."

"Oh, I don't know. Someone has got to lose. I have paid more money and got less fun for it; I'm not cursing."

"It seems to me," remarked the little lady, "that you do get so little fun for your money nowadays, that you ought to be properly thankful when you do get some. And I'm bound to say that I always do get some fun at Monte Carlo; and one time I won a million francs—fact! I was proud of it as pie. Then when I lost it all I was proud of that. I went about saying that I'd lost a million—I didn't say what. I let them think it was pounds sterling; I felt two inches higher in my shoes as I said it. It does make people feel as if they were growing bigger when they brag about their losses."

"It doesn't make me feel as if I were growing bigger." This was Lady Chorlston. She said it with a very stern expression of countenance.

"You see, Lady Chorlston, there's so little of me that I've got to grow bigger—somehow; and if a bit

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of brag only makes me feel that I'm growing, why that's something. I hate to have my husband, when I'm standing close up to him, go asking people where I am."

After dinner, in spite of a few words which Mme. de Constal addressed to him, instead of going to the drawing-room, Ronald Denton went straight to his own apartment. His hostess waylaid him in the hall.

"Well, Mr. Dennett, where are you off to? The ladies will miss you. We are thinking, a little later on, of having a little modest game, and it will spoil everything if we don't have you."

Denton took something out of his coat pocket and held it out to her.

"I found this in the pocket of the coat which was put out for me to wear. It is true that I am reduced to wearing other people's clothes, it's therefore the more necessary that I should return to the owner the money which I find in the pockets."

"Don't be silly; it was put there for you to play with. I'm your banker, I have some money of yours. I am only returning you some of your own."

"I'd rather not receive it in that way, Mme. de Constal. I do not propose to play. I am going to my own room." He moved towards the staircase, then, stopping, turned again. "Did I understand you to say that Miss Hudson has a headache?"

"Rather a bad one, I am afraid." An odd look came into the lady's eyes as she spoke. "So bad a

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one that it may keep her in her own room for a day or two. It was rather unfortunate, was it not, that you should have been recognised. Luckily they had forgotten your name—I should say the name of the man who is dead. It only shows how our deeds live after us. If you would only take my very earnest advice, as a true friend, you'd try the Argentine at the earliest possible moment, and take Alice with you. That would cure her headache as nothing else would—and her heartache, too. You'd run no risk of recognition there—you would both be as happy as the day is long. If you must be off to bed, good night."

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brought to them, and by what train. They would cause the most exhaustive inquiries to be made. If there was the least cause to suspect that he had not been destroyed in the accident to the train, probably, at that moment, the police were on the look-out for him all over Europe. And Mme. de Constal had tried to lull him into a belief that because she had made a prisoner of him in the Château d'Ernan, therefore he need fear nothing from the world without.

There was that suggestion which she had repeated about the Argentine. He quite candidly admitted that he had no particular desire to feel another pair of handcuffs about his wrists. Now that there was even a bare possibility of his becoming acquainted with them a second time, his distaste for them became active. If only he could reach the Argentine ! He thought it quite possible that his hostess might ensure his doing so, if he paid her price and married Alice Hudson.

The mere thought of that as a practical possibility turned his brain. He felt all at once that it was impossible to remain in his room and think of her. It was still early. He believed that, as a rule, the doors and windows were shut when darkness came ; but as there were guests in the house, it was possible that he might still be able to get into the grounds. At any rate, he would try.

He went back downstairs, to find that the hall door was open. It had been closed when he was speaking to Madame ; someone must have opened it

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since. He went through it. The night was fine, but cool. The change of temperature was so marked that he shivered. He turned the collar of his coat up, and began to move along the terrace at a good round pace, in order to keep himself warm. He was not sure which was the room in which they had dined, or the salon to which the guests had retired afterwards. He had an idea that they were behind some of the windows which he was passing. If so, it was odd how not a ray of light was visible. He became conscious that that was a characteristic of the whole house—from without it was all in darkness; it was like a great, black tomb.

Reaching the end of the terrace, leaning over the parapet, he became aware that something was happening in the grounds. A number of people seemed to be passing along one of the paths which led to the woods. He could hear better than he could see them—they walked with a regular tramp, as if they were keeping step. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he could dimly make out what seemed to be a black shadow, blacker even than the night, passing along one of the winding paths.

As he stood he became conscious all at once that someone had come out of the house and crossed the terrace at a run. It was a female figure—there was light enough for him to distinguish that. He saw her do as he was doing : go to the edge of the terrace, lean on the parapet, and look out over the grounds. For a moment or two his heart beat faster at the

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thought that it might be Alice. But all at once the woman stood straight up, a man came towards her, whose coming she apparently awaited. His figure was familiar.

"That's Achille," said Denton to himself. "I'd swear to him anywhere—and the woman is Mme. de Constal. He has brought her a message. It seems to be a pretty long one." The two figures continued to talk to each other for some minutes. "Her guests will miss her if she doesn't look out. Hallo, what's that?" A sound came through the air. "Was that the hoot of an owl—a real owl, or was it a signal? It came from the direction in which that shadow went, which had vanished out of sight. Madame seems to be excited."

He could distinctly hear the woman's voice—an agitated woman's voice—speaking either in anger or in fear. It came from the feminine figure on the terrace. Suddenly she ran quickly back to the house. The man remained for a moment, then vanished.

"Now I wonder where he went?" This was the question Denton put to himself. "I wondered where he came from, now I wonder where he went. So far as I know, there are no steps just there, and I can't see Achille dropping over the parapet; besides, I don't believe he did." He retraced his steps. As he did so, an idea occurred to him. "It would be rather a joke if, not knowing I'm here, they shut the door. I might find it difficult to induce them to open it again." The idea expanded. "I've a mind to go

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back to my room, put myself in some other clothes, and take myself off. I believe it could be done without their missing me, at any rate, till the morning. I'd do it if it weren't for Alice. I wonder if it was true what Mme. de Constal said, that she didn't come to dinner because she had a headache? The woman's such a liar. Here's someone else; one of Madame's guests is taking the air."

As he approached the entrance to the house, someone came through it—this time a man. He stood just far enough away from the house to enable him to accustom his eyes to the darkness. Evidently he was looking about him. Denton paused, peering at the man who had suddenly loomed through the shadows.

"I wonder if he's seen me? I'm in no mood for conversation. If he hasn't——" It seemed as if he had. A voice came through the darkness.

"Who's there?" There was a ring in the voice, either of authority or surprise.

"That's the man who sat next but one to me at dinner, or I'm mistaken. I wondered who he was. Since I'm discovered, I'd better make the best of it."

He moved forward; the stranger advanced towards him. Denton's eyes had grown sufficiently accustomed to the gloom to enable him to realise that this was a tallish man, who walked with his head and shoulders held well back. The stranger addressed him when they were still some feet apart.

"Ah, Mr. Dennett, it's you. I wondered why

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you had deserted us so early. You prefer the air?" Denton said nothing. "I don't think we've been introduced. My name is Spragg, Thomas Spragg, and of course I know yours is Dennett. Fine old place this seems to be, with an interesting history. You live here?"

The young man ignored the question entirely. He asked one on his own account; the one which he had asked Miss Chorlston.

"You come from England?"

"Not quite recently. Of course, I do come from England, but to-day I have come from Monte Carlo—we all hail from there. I made Mme. de Constal's acquaintance some little time ago. She was good enough to ask me to look in on my homeward way, and here I am. I understand you also were at Monte Carlo. She was in the train which came to grief; I suppose you weren't in it also?"

For a moment the young man's heart seemed to stand still, almost as it had done that afternoon when Inspector Jenner laid his hand upon his shoulder. The question might have been asked for the sake of asking; perhaps it was its unexpectedness which made it seem to have such significance. When he continued silent the stranger spoke again.

"When did you leave Monte Carlo?"

"I don't remember the exact date. Have you any English papers with you? Oddly enough, I haven't seen one since I've been here. We're rather out of the world; English papers don't reach us."

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"It does seem to be rather an isolated spot. Is there a post? I should have thought you would have got English papers. I suppose you do get French ones?"

"Not every day." The young man was conscious that the other was eyeing him in the darkness in a manner which induced him to add something else. "As you said, this is a fine place; very fine indeed. Are you here for long?"

"That's more than I can tell you. Between ourselves, I take a great interest in this part of the world; I have done for some time. It's possible that I may be here—for quite a time."

Denton was sure that there was significance in the speaker's tone. All sorts of wild notions began to fly through his brain. Could he be here under such circumstances as he himself was? The stranger asked a question. "Did you hear a funny noise just now?"

"What do you call a funny noise?"

"The owl makes rather a funny noise—at times." Moving closer to the stranger, Denton tried to see more of his face. "I don't think you've ever seen me before, Mr. Dennett, and I'm afraid you can't see very much of me now."

"To tell you the truth, there is something in your voice which is so familiar that I was wondering if I ever had seen you before."

"I fancy not. Just before I came out, wasn't there someone moving about the grounds?"

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"Mme. de Constal was here on the terrace, talking, I think, to her valet de chambre."

"Her valet de chambre? Oh, that black-jowled gentleman who seemed to be in charge of the service at dinner was, I believe, her valet de chambre. I've seen him before."

"Then this is not your first visit to the Château d'Ernan?"

"Oh yes, it is. I saw that—gentleman a long way from here, when he wasn't a valet de chambre." Again Mr. Denton had an uncomfortable feeling that there was significance in the speaker's tone. "By the way, you haven't answered my question, Mr. Dennett. I asked if just before I came out there wasn't someone moving in the grounds—wasn't there?"

"I believe there was—at least I thought I heard someone moving. I believe I saw someone."

"Perhaps more than one person?"

"I couldn't positively say, but I fancy there was more than one. Why do you ask?"

They had been walking side by side. Now the stranger, stopping, turned squarely towards his companion.

"The fact is, Mr. Dennett, that I take a very great interest in the Château d'Ernan; that's what has brought me here."

"I understood you to say that you met Mme. de Constal casually at Monte Carlo, and that you were here merely because she asked you to look in on your homeward way—as a chance acquaintance."

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"So she did—that's true. But, between ourselves, Mr. Dennett, I don't think she ever meant to ask me at all. The matter was so engineered that she had to. Did she ask you here?"

"It's not likely that I came uninvited."

"No, not uninvited—not exactly uninvited—but there are several ways of being invited, aren't there? I'll be frank with you, Mr. Dennett; when you didn't show in the salon I rather expected to find you here—that's why I came. I wanted to drop you a hint. Of course, you know the Château d'Ernan better than I do, but I've got a notion in my head that it's rather a queer place, and harbours some queer company. I'm pretty sure that some queer things happen here. Whatever inducements may be held out to you, I strongly advise you to keep clear of them. That's the hint I wanted to drop. You keep your eyes open, and your ears, too. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I rather fancy that some of the people in this house are cleverer than you. Have as little to do with them as ever you can. There's another thing. I've a notion that something very queer happened here this very night. When you saw and heard those people moving in the grounds, if you'd gone down to them I think you'd have been surprised. Whom have we here? Isn't this our hostess?"

A feminine figure came out of the house. Mr. Spragg moved to meet her. "Come out to enjoy the air, Mme. de Constal? How are things going in the salon? Is anybody winning? I was saying to your

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friend, Mr. Dennett, how much I am struck by the fine place you have got here. I've seen a good many of our famous English houses, but I don't think that among them there's anything finer than the Château d'Ernan. Allow me to help you with that wrap; you'll feel the chill."

Mme. de Constal was settling some sort of a cape which she had been carrying about her neck and shoulders. Mr. Spragg went to her assistance. "Why," he said, "you're shivering."

CHAPTER XXII

A MESSENGER

RONALD DENTON would not have liked to put it in so many words, but he did feel that he had been waylaid by Miss Chorlston. He had come out to look for Alice, or at least to glean some news of her. He had had a restless night; sleeping and waking, he had been oppressed by a feeling that trouble was near, which pressed with special heaviness on Alice. So soon as he had swallowed his coffee, he had descended in search of her, and the moment he had set foot on the terrace he had met Miss Chorlston.

"So you are still alive." She greeted him as if she had known him for years. He had a vague notion that she was a finer girl than ever, in a tight-fitting blue dress which showed off the swelling contours of her figure. "What became of you last night? I couldn't sleep a wink, I had to get up. This is a very fine house, and all that sort of thing, but last night I felt as though it were haunted. I can sleep anywhere as a rule, but last night each time I closed my eyes I opened them again with a start. I had a most extraordinary feeling that something had happened in my room that wasn't nice to think of. This is something like a morning; it is good to be out in it

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after a night of terror. Come for a walk on the terrace."

"The fact is I was rather looking for someone."

"Who's the someone? Anyone I know?"

"No, I don't think it is anyone you know. You haven't seen——?"

"What haven't I seen?" He had hesitated, and stopped. For some reason he was reluctant to mention Alice Hudson to this young woman. "Your someone will turn up all right. I'm not going to run away with you. We'll keep well in sight of the house. I shouldn't wonder if my mother has changed her mind about Mme. de Constal; she does deal in quick changes. She lost I don't know how much money last night, and I believe the pater lost too."

"What did you play?"

"I scarcely played at all, I found it frightfully dull; I think you might have shown yourself. They began with baccarat, then they went on to roulette—that's a knowing little roulette table of Madame's—then they finished up with trente et quarante, old Girodet taking the bank. There were supposed to be no chances in favour of the bank, but, my word, didn't he win! That's where my mother came a cropper. I don't see what she had to do with her losing, but I shall be surprised if one of the first things the mater says to me this morning isn't that she fears that she was mistaken in Mme. de Constal after all. I shall play the part of the sympathetic daughter, and tell her that it serves her right for

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coming to the woman's house. I always have said, and always shall say, that you can carry your tenderness for what mamma calls the 'oppressed' too far."

"In what sense is Mme. de Constal supposed to be oppressed?"

"Of course, she isn't oppressed; that's all the merest nonsense. Whenever a man is tried for anything, whether it's bigamy or murder, the mater thinks he's oppressed. If it's a woman, she keeps on yelling against the world's cold cruelty. When the Constal case was on, from the fuss the mater made, you'd have thought it was she who was being tried."

"I'm afraid I'm rather out of these things. What do you mean by the Constal case?"

Miss Chorlston stood still to stare at him.

"Do you mean to say that you don't know? And you're staying in her house?"

"I made her acquaintance under rather peculiar circumstances, and she brought me here. I had never heard of her until I became her guest."

"That's funny. She seems to have ways of her own. But you must have heard of the Constal case; all the world has."

"Then I'm afraid that I'm not one of the world, because I haven't."

"She was Madame Chabert, the singer. Did you ever hear of her?"

"I have a sort of hazy recollection of having done so. I know she can sing; she sings and plays magnificently."

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"She ought to. She was a big personage in her way. Then she married old de Constal. He was a very rich man, and I suppose he made it worth her while. But the marriage didn't turn out a success, which wasn't surprising considering that he was about fifty years older than she was; and then—well, then he died. The question was, how he died. He was found one morning in an apartment in Paris lying on the floor of his bedroom with his back broken. Other things had happened to him as well, but the doctors declared that someone had brought him down, over the end of the bed, with such terrific force that his spine was broken. He was a poor, feeble old party, and I dare say his spine didn't take much breaking. Do you mean to say you heard nothing about it?"

"Now that you recall the facts, I do remember having heard something about it, only in those days I was not interested in things of that kind."

"You'd soon change all that if you lived in our house. My mother gloats over them. They charged his wife, our hostess, with murdering him. Her trial divided France into two camps, and all the world over people were for or against her. They had had a dreadful quarrel that night. He was ailing and had requested her to stay at home. He generally was ailing, and he generally did request her to stay at home. They quarrelled because she wouldn't stay at home. She went out, and the servants declared that the quarrel was renewed when she came home.

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In the morning they found him dead. There were doctors, of course, who appeared for her, and they suggested that the actual cause of his death was failure of the heart. Their theory was that he was getting out of bed in the night, had some sort of convulsive attack, fell over the end of the bed, the fall broke his back, and down he went on to the floor. Some of them declared that he had died of heart failure before the actual fall, and that his back was broken after he was dead. It was pleaded that anyhow it was monstrous to suppose that any woman could have strength enough to do what the prosecution alleged."

"I'm not insinuating anything on that account, but I should say that Mme. de Constal was at least as strong as the average man."

"That was proved at the trial. Lots of people swore that they had seen her perform quite remarkable feats of strength. That was not all. There was more than an insinuation that she had not committed the murder single-handed. Some of the servants were of opinion that when the row was at its height, three persons were quarrelling, not two only, and that the third person was a man. They swore that when the row ceased they heard someone steal out of the old man's room. Some of them said they heard two persons. The concierge, who had pulled the usual string to permit of Madame entering when she returned in the early morning—you know how the concierge, when he is in bed, opens the front door by

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pulling a cord?—had a misty idea that Madame might not have been alone, but he swore that he let no one out. A piece of plaster had fallen off the sill of one of the windows at the back. There was a street in front of M. de Constal's apartment, and another at the back, as is not seldom the case in Paris. The theory of the prosecution was that the third person had entered through the front door, and that, after the crime was committed, Madame had assisted him to escape through a window at the back. However, nothing was found out about this mysterious third person, and she strenuously denied that there had been one. She admitted that there had been a difference of opinion on her return, while asserting that the servants had exaggerated its importance. She said that her husband was subject to convulsive attacks, and declared it to be her opinion that he had had one after she had left him, and that was how he died. Surely you must have read about it in the papers? Sometimes there were columns."

"I am afraid that in those days I scarcely read the papers at all. But, as I said, now that you have recalled the bare outlines to my recollection, I do remember something. What was the result of the trial?"

"Of course, she was acquitted. How do you suppose she'd be here? Her counsel was an awfully clever man. She was quite good-looking. She worked her good looks for all she was worth on the Paris jury. They refused to say she was guilty,

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though lots of people—I have always understood they were those who knew most about it—said she was. Of course, my mother said she wasn't; she always is on the wrong side——”

“Which means, I presume, that you were of the contrary opinion.”

“Well, considering that I'm in her house, it's rather awkward for me to say exactly what I do think. As I told you last night, I certainly shouldn't be here if it weren't for mamma. When mamma made her acquaintance in Monte Carlo, she gushed over her as if she were an innocent, injured angel. Nothing would satisfy her except that we should come here, if only to show that there was one respectable and high-minded woman on the side of the oppressed, and papa and I had to come with her. And as I say, after what she lost at trente et quarante, and those other pretty little games, I shouldn't wonder if this morning the accent wasn't quite so much on the 'oppressed' as it was last night. Mme. de Constal does seem to have a beautiful place here. I had no idea it was anything like so fine. But what I can't make out is what you're doing here. It's true that she didn't say so in so many words, but Mme. de Constal certainly did give me to understand that you were a very old friend of hers, and now it turns out that you don't even know so much about her as I do. How long have you been here? How long are you going to stop? And how did you make her acquaintance? I'm not generally curious about people, but those

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three questions I would like you to answer. Here are those bothering Staceys; now you'll be able to wriggle out of telling me what I want to know."

Denton, saw, coming towards them along the terrace, the man who had sat opposite him at dinner, and the little lady who had sat on his right hand.

"Are those people named Stacey?"

Miss Chorlston looked at him with amazement which seemed to have grown greater.

"What do you know? That is George P. Stacey—the George P. Stacey of Chicago. Whether he's worth forty million, or four hundred million, no one seems to know, he doesn't seem to care. She's got a ship full of money of her own. They're not only frightful, they're ridiculous gamblers; the more they lose the more amused they seem to be. They say he must have money on everything he does. I have heard that he won't even play a game of golf for less than a thousand francs, but as he can't play for nutshells wherever there are links he's sure to get a game."

Denton would have liked to retreat; he had no wish to hear more of their memories of him at Monte Carlo. But retreat was impossible, and they were still some feet away from him when they touched upon the subject which he most wished to shun.

"Denton—that's the name we thought yours was."

Without raising his voice, Mr. Stacey's nasal accent had a penetrative quality which seemed to the

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startled young man to carry them right across the grounds. Fortunately he was leaning against the parapet, or the start he gave would have been more obvious. Mrs. Stacey took up the tale in a way which, if the thing were possible, added to her hearer's confusion.

"I knew D was the letter it began with, because Elsie Moore, she spoke of you as 'her dear D.' And when I asked her what D stood for, I remember quite well that she said Denton—Ronald Denton, because she asked me what I thought of Ronald as a name, and I said that I thought it was just sweet, and so I do. And if ever I marry again, I believe that I'll make it a point that his name is Ronald."

"Call me Ronald—you can." This was her husband. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Well, Mr.—I don't know if I'm to call you Denton——"

"But his name isn't Denton. Mme. de Constal told me herself that it was Dennett. What is your name?"

He hesitated, wondering, grimly, if he looked as miserable as he felt.

"My name is Robert Dennett."

"Then how came Elsie Moore," cried Mrs. Stacey, "to make a mistake like that? Or do you go about the world with several names? You don't look as if you were that sort—you look as if you were a white man."

"You leave Mr. Dennett alone; if he says his

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name is Dennett it is Dennett. This is a nice little house of yours, Mr. Dennett, so simple and unpretentious, the sort of place where nothing ever happens."

"It is not my house, as I presume you are aware."

"I had an idea of the kind, I'll own. A nice quiet little game we had last night—I guess I'm going to pay for my entertainment. If I don't get some of my own back to-night, it'll be as dear as an hotel. And after we went to bed, if there wasn't murder done, I should say it wasn't for the want of trying."

"Did you hear the noise?" The question came from Miss Chorlston.

"I heard so many noises that I don't know to which particular one you may be referring. When I got up and tried to locate them, I couldn't find my way about the place at all. Every way I turned there seemed to be a door, and the electric light wouldn't work; and as I kept knocking myself against walls I couldn't see, I concluded I'd better go back to bed again, and I went."

"A nice fuss he was in. You might have thought it was he who was being murdered."

"I believe I'd almost just as soon it had been. To have to lie there while the finishing touches were being put on somebody else, without being able to find out who or why. I had a most unpleasant notion it was Mr. Spragg."

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Denton's thoughts flew back to the stranger who had said such odd things to him on the terrace the night before, and to the feeling he had had that Mme. de Constal was afraid of him.

"Just because," Mrs. Stacey went on, "he fancied he heard someone call out, 'You say your name is Spragg,' in rather an unfriendly tone of voice, and then he thought he heard a gun fired, or what he calls a gun. He jumps to conclusions."

"Put it that way, if you like. I'll talk presently. When Mr. Spragg came up to me at Monte Carlo, and introduced himself to me as a man who had known my late partner, Andrew J. Sloane, I felt drawn to him. There's the Sloane money going begging, and there's so much of it that no one can count how much, and there's the rightful heir wandering, God knows where, over the face of the earth, living on, maybe, less than nothing a year. When Mr. Spragg dropped a hint that he might put me on the track of the missing heir the tie between us seemed to become still stronger. He's never touched upon the subject since, except in elusive hints, so of course I don't like to think that he's found trouble before he had a fair chance of pouring out his heart to me. And it certainly is a fact that the inquiries I made about him of the individual who brought us our little breakfast didn't meet with the success I was entitled to expect. He didn't seem to know anything about Mr. Spragg at all—didn't even seem to know that he had ever been in the house. What

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that man didn't seem not to know about Spragg I hadn't time to discover."

"Here's Mme. de Constal," said his wife. "We shall be able to ask her."

Mme. de Constal, her face framed in black lace, greeted them while she was still at a distance.

"Well, my children, what do you think of the Château d'Ernan in the daylight?"

"Lovely," said Miss Chorlston.

"Too utterly sweet," said Mrs. Stacey; but Mr. Stacey asked her as soon as he judged her to be near enough :

"I was wondering, Mme. de Constal, what had become of Mr. Spragg? There's something I particularly wish to say to him, and he don't seem to be on view anywhere. If he's in his room, can you tell me which it is?"

Mme. de Constal ceased to advance. She turned towards the expanse of country which stretched out below the terrace. She waved her hand.

"Nearly all that is mine—almost as far as you can see. Sometimes my heart swells with pride when I think what a large piece of the world I own. What was that you were saying about Mr. Spragg?"

She smiled at Mr. Stacey.

"I was just wondering if you could tell me which room he occupies, so that I could go and have a chat with him."

"Didn't you know? I thought you knew."

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"Knew what? You must remember, Mme. de Constal, that I'm an ignorant man."

"But since Mr. Spragg is a friend of yours, I thought he would have told you."

"If you'll let me know where I can find him, perhaps he will tell me."

"But that's just it—he's gone."

"Gone?" It was Mr. Stacey who spoke, but the others joined him in staring. "He seemed to hint to me last night that he might be staying here quite a while."

"Of that I know nothing. A messenger came for him early this morning, and disturbed the whole house, and it seems he went with him. I don't wish to seem to criticise a guest, but I cannot help thinking that Mr. Spragg was rather inconsiderate. You see that spire over there among the trees, that's the church of Saint Enogat. They have some very curious glass there. I don't know if either of you care for that kind of thing, but if you do, it's quite worth seeing."

CHAPTER XXIII

SUSPICIONS

By the time Mme. de Constal strolled away, nearly all her guests were assembled on the terrace, Mr. Stacey said, the moment she had gone :

"I don't want to insinuate a word, but of all the strange stories, that of hers about Spragg is a little beyond me. It's funny that I should have heard what I did hear; considering that he told me only last night that he might be here for a week, and perhaps more. That yarn of hers about a messenger coming in the middle of the night makes it funnier still."

"I hope," sighed Lady Chorlston, "that I've not been deceived in Mme. de Constal. I don't know if you noticed with what extraordinary persistence I seemed to lose last night—a persistence which requires explanation?"

Her daughter glanced at Ronald. Mr. Krauss spoke next.

"I just came up in time to hear what she said about all this fine place being hers, as far as the eye can reach. I happen to know that every foot of it is mortgaged up to the hilt, and that at this very moment the mortgagees are threatening to foreclose."

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"Are you one of them, Mr. Krauss?" The question came from a grey-haired man, who seemed to have a knack of keeping himself in the background.

Mr. Krauss looked at him, rolling his cigar round between his lips. "Suppose I am, Colonel Gardner, would you like to take my share off my hands at the price I paid for it?"

"No, Mr. Krauss, no; you spoke with such an air of certainty that I merely wondered."

"Wondered what I knew of Mme. de Constal? We all know something about her, don't we? I fancy you know as much about her as anyone, only you're one of those retiring men, colonel, who leave others to do the talking."

Just then Mme. de Constal, coming out of the house, waved her handkerchief to them as if it were a signal, and called :

"Mr. Dennett! May I speak to you—one moment, please?"

Ronald hesitated, conscious of an almost singular reluctance to go to her.

"Mme. de Constal is calling to you," said Miss Chorlston; "don't you hear her?"

"What is it?" asked Ronald.

"I can't speak to you at that distance," replied his hostess. "I don't want to bawl. Will you come for just one minute, please?"

Ronald went, still reluctant. The others watched him, Mr. Stacey indulging in comment as soon as his back was turned.

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"I wonder what that young gentleman's position is at the Château d'Ernan. Is he the lady's spy, or—what is he? I'll swear his name wasn't Dennett the last time I saw him. He left Monte Carlo in a great hurry, without saying good-bye to any of his friends, or even sending them a card, and no one seemed to know where he'd gone to. It's a surprise to find him here as Robert Dennett."

Ronald, having reached the lady, showed a disposition to hear what she had to say there.

"I can't possibly speak to you here, my dear boy. I don't want all the world to hear. You must come into the house." When he hesitated, she added: "I have something to say to you about Alice—something which I think you had better hear."

Ronald might have his doubts about the lady, but as he was anxious for tidings of Miss Hudson, he followed her into the house. As he did so, the grey-haired man, detaching himself from the group of his fellow-guests, began to move towards the château. Mr. Stacey, in accordance with what seemed to be his habit, commented on him also.

"That man's a puzzle to me. He gave me to understand that Spragg was just a casual acquaintance, but I've seen things which make me wonder if they haven't been friends from boyhood. Someone introduced him to me as Colonel Gardner, but a big bug at Monte Carlo told me that if he got his colonelcy anywhere it was from the secret service department of the English police. I don't know, but

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the more I travel, the more I wonder who anybody is. It isn't often that they describe themselves, but Monte Carlo seems to be full of curiosities."

"It's not so full of curiosities as the Château d'Ernan."

This was Mr. Krauss. They all looked at him.

When Mr. Denton entered the hall, he turned instinctively towards the oak-panelled room on the left, in which he had had several tête-à-tête interviews with his hostess. She laid her hand on his coat sleeve.

"Not that way this time. I want to introduce you to my own particular den. It is a compliment I pay you, because it is only old friends, and those in whom I have the greatest confidence, who are ever allowed to enter there."

He was disposed to tell her that he desired neither to be regarded as an old friend nor to receive her confidence, but he refrained. She opened a door at the end of the hall, of whose existence he had been ignorant, and held it for him to enter, smiling as she did so.

"Be quick, please. This is the way to my own private quarters. I don't want anyone to come into the hall and find it out."

He had a feeling that if he once passed that door he might find himself in a very uncomfortable position, but such an idea, in broad daylight, with all those strangers about, seemed absurd. Accepting her invitation, he went through the door. The moment he was through she closed it behind him.

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He had a notion that as she did so someone entered the hall from the grounds. The same notion seemed to occur to her. She exclaimed, as if unconsciously uttering her thoughts aloud :

“I wonder if he saw?”

Although he doubted if the question had been addressed to him, he answered it.

“What does it matter if he did? Does that door mask something which you would rather he did not see?”

As she glanced at him she smiled, this time, as it seemed to him, with difficulty. It was a second or two before she answered. She was either listening to what was taking place on the other side of that door, or thinking what to say.

“Mr. Dennett, what curious things you say! It really is too droll; I cannot think how you get such curious notions in your head. As if there was ever anything which I should wish to hide. Now I'll take you to my own particular den. I think that, as you English say, you'll find it comfy.”

She took him through what seemed to him to be an endless series of passages, doors opening out of them on both sides at frequent intervals.

“That den of yours seems to be a long way off. This is an amazingly large house of yours—all this part of it is quite strange to me.”

“Don't you know that this is one of the largest houses in France, and one of the most famous—if only because of the extraordinary things which have

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happened here? They began to build it at the end of the fifteenth century. The Château d'Ernan, if it were to tell all the strange things it had seen, what a story it would be—the crimes which have been committed within its walls!

All at once a sound struck Denton's ears. He paused.

"What was that?" he asked. "It seemed to come from the other side of that door."

"My dear Mr. Denton, what is what?"

"I thought I heard someone—crying, or doing something, as if in pain. What's on the other side of that door?"

"That door leads to the servants' quarters. Here's my den. Let me make you welcome to its mysteries."

She held open a door, on the other side of which was a very fine, spacious apartment. He entered, she closed the door. They were in the room with the painted ceiling, to which we have already been introduced. He looked about him with curious eyes.

"This is a magnificent apartment; it might be a room in a palace."

"You might regard it as a room in a palace, since I believe at least one King of France has been its occupant. The suite to which it belongs is the crowning glory of the château, which is perhaps one reason why I use it as my own. Now, Mr. Dennett, I have something which I wish to say to you. It begins with a question. Are you, or are you not, going to marry Alice?"

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In the immense room there were several tables, of different sorts, shapes, and sizes. The young man stood by one fashioned out of massive black oak. Scroll work ran round the edges. It was covered with an amazing sort of litter. He leaned against the edge, considering his hostess a minute or two before he answered.

"Where is Miss Hudson?"

"If your answer is what it ought to be, almost before you know it she will be in your arms."

"I don't know if you realise, Mme. de Constal, what a dangerous game this is you are playing."

She raised her eyebrows in, as it were, a note of exclamation.

"My good young man! What do you mean?"

"Every creature in your house suspects you; not one of your guests has a good word to say for you. I have only to place them in possession of certain facts with which you know I am acquainted, and your position will become a very unpleasant one indeed."

"Is the young man stark mad? You leave my position alone. It is your position which is likely to become unpleasant if you are not very careful."

"What has become of Mr. Spragg?"

His hostess started, staring at him as if bewildered.

"What do you mean? What is it you are asking me?"

"Your story about the message he received in the

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middle of the night, and his leaving because of it, was only a lie, but one which failed to carry the least conviction. I know better."

"You know better? What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Mme. de Constal, I am going to give myself up for the murder of Edward Osborne."

"You are going to give yourself up—to whom?"

"I am going to tell those people downstairs who I am, and what I am, and I'm going to ask them to enable me to place myself in communication with the police."

She laughed oddly.

"You are, are you? We shall see. You use brave words, my lad. What else do you propose to do?"

"You hold Miss Hudson as your prisoner; why, you only know, though I begin to have my suspicions."

"You——" She moved towards him, almost as if she would have struck him, and then checked herself. "You begin to have your suspicions? What do you mean by you begin to have your suspicions? What are they?"

"As they are only suspicions, and may be baseless, I do not propose to tell you what they are. But having informed the persons whom you are entertaining as your guests about myself, I intend to inform them of your treatment of Miss Hudson, and her position as your prisoner. I think very soon after

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that she will cease to be your prisoner, and I shall be in the hands of the police."

"Aren't you, as you English say, counting your chickens a little before they are hatched?"

She was regarding him with something in her eyes which made him conscious that he and she were about to measure swords, and which made him wish that they were in that oak-panelled parlour instead of this particular den of hers.

"You have been frank with me, I will be equally frank with you—perhaps even more frank. There's a parson on the premises; all the proper formalities have been attended to, all the necessary declarations made. You have both of you been resident in this house the statutory time. You are going to marry Alice Hudson in half an hour, or perhaps less. After you have married her you will be at perfect liberty to hand yourself over to the police if you choose, and, if you wish, to make Miss Hudson the widow of a man who has been hanged for murder—in which case her punishment will probably be greater than yours. You will certainly be killing her as well as yourself. But all this is for your after consideration; you are going to begin by making her your wife. Be so good as to answer the question which I put to you at the beginning. Are you going to do this of your own free will?"

CHAPTER XXIV

A REVEREND GENTLEMAN

HIS answer was to move rapidly towards the door by which they had entered. For an instant her attitude suggested an intention to interpose herself—an intention, however, which was reconsidered. Resting her head on the back of the chair which we once saw occupied by M. Perret, she watched him with smiling eyes. He found, on trying the handle, that the door refused to yield. He tried it three or four times.

"It seems to be locked," he said. "Yet I don't know how that can be, because I did not see you lock it."

"Perhaps it locked itself; perhaps it is worked by a spring, which, when you push the door to, locks it. There are such doors, although you may not have heard of them."

"Does that mean that I am a prisoner?"

"My good young man, you have been a prisoner ever since the night on which you—robbed Inspector Jenner and left him to burn in the train. You will continue to be a prisoner until you have done what I wish you to do. You have not answered my question. You have not said whether you will marry your lady love of your own free will, which means, I take

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it, that you won't. That makes no difference. You will marry her before you leave this room, whether you will or won't."

She touched a bell which was within her reach. A door opened and two persons entered. One was Achille, the other was a person he had never seen before—a big, burly man, whose face was ornamented with strips of sticking-plaster. Mme. de Constal went through the ceremony of introduction with a little air of formal grace, as if it were seriously meant.

"Mr. Dennett, permit me to have the pleasure of introducing you to M. Léon Perret. M. Perret—Mr. Dennett. I fancy, Mr. Dennett, you may have heard M. Perret's name."

His answer was not couched in the courteous form which marked the lady's words. He moved a little forward, his fists clenched at his sides.

"You blackguard! So you still bear some of the marks she gave you. If I ever have the opportunity, I'll give you marks which you'll carry to your coward's grave!"

M. Perret returned Mr. Dennett as good as he sent.

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Dennett. Aren't you the individual who killed his friend, and then ran away to save his skin? It becomes such an one to strut like a bantam cock and speak of cowardice."

Ronald's reply was to rush across the room and strike M. Perret. That gentleman, however, catching him by the wrist, gave it a sudden turn, and sent him

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blundering across the room till his progress was stayed by the table against which he had previously been leaning.

"If it were worth my while," said M. Perret, "I'd strip the clothes off you and beat you till you were black and blue."

"M. Dennett," chorused Achille, "is a very brave gentleman with his tongue." He spoke with that peculiar suavity which almost hinted that his organs of speech had been oiled.

"You coward!" cried Ronald. "Do you suppose that because you're bigger and stronger than I am that makes you brave? You are like the curs who play with marked cards—you take care that all the odds are in your favour. You give me anything like an equal chance, and I'll show you if I'm good with my tongue only."

Even as he spoke his glance fell on a polished mahogany case which was on the table by which he was standing—and he wondered. The lady played the part of peacemaker or pretended to.

"Come, children, no quarrelling, if you please. My dear Léon, M. Dennett is a very gallant gentleman; if he is a little hasty, it is a fault of youth. We have more serious matters to occupy our attention; amuse yourselves when they are done. Where is the Reverend Mr. Hayes?"

M. Perret nodded towards the door through which he had come.

"Outside. Are you ready for him?"

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"In one moment." Mme. de Constal took a folded paper from a drawer. "Mr. Dennett, this is an authorisation from the proper authorities, permitting a marriage to take place between Mr. Robert Dennett and Alice Hudson, and allowing such a marriage to be solemnised by an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, at the Château d'Ernan. I have acquainted Alice with the contents of this document, and she has expressed her perfect willingness to marry you under the circumstances and on the conditions set forth in this document."

"I don't believe it."

The lady showed no signs of being irritated by his flat contradiction.

"She will be able to tell you presently with her own lips that what I say of her is true. What I want to know is, if she is willing to marry you, will you be willing to marry her?"

"Let me see that paper."

"With pleasure, if you will give me your word of honour to return it to me at once when you have read it—uninjured." He hesitated. "If you find it difficult to give such a promise, I shall have pleasure in reading it aloud to you, Mr. Dennett."

"I don't care what is on that paper, or what it pretends to be, or where it pretends to come from, I am sure it's a fraud. No form of marriage, such as you speak of, can be anything but a mockery. As I have said, I am beginning to have suspicions of what it is you are after, and it's quite clear that you mean

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to stick at nothing to get it. What infernal means of persuasion you have used to Miss Hudson I cannot say; if she has said anything like you say she has, I am sure you have used some. Whatever you have done to her, I am certain that she doesn't realise what a trick it is you are scheming to play on her, with my connivance."

Achille cut him short, interposing with his accustomed suavity.

"What is the use of listening to this gentleman? He will talk, and talk, and talk—we must do."

"We will do, my dear Achille. Ask the Rev. Mr. Hayes to come in."

The gentleman referred to must have been very close at hand, because Achille had only to open the door and he walked through it—a short, thin gentleman, bald-headed, spectacled, clad in nondescript attire, which might or might not have been clerical. Since nowadays so many clergymen dress as laymen it is not always easy to distinguish. He stood looking about him when he was well in the room with the air of a person who expects to see something remarkable without quite knowing what.

"Monsieur, I do not know this gentleman's name"—the reference was to Achille—"gave me to understand that all was ready."

"And all is nearly ready, dear Mr. Hayes. Mr. Dennett, this is the Rev. Mr. Hayes, late English chaplain at Pont-sur-Oise. This, Mr. Hayes, is the gentleman you are shortly to join in holy matrimony

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to the lady of his heart. Will you please explain to him that that union will be perfectly valid."

The Rev. Mr. Hayes seemed surprised. He had what might have been a prayer book in one hand, with the other he settled his spectacles on his nose. He looked at Mr. Dennett very hard with short-sighted eyes.

"I do not understand. Not valid? Any marriage which I should celebrate? This gentleman cannot think that I should associate myself with anything that was improper. You cannot think that, sir?"

The question was addressed to Ronald, who answered it after a fashion of his own.

"Are you a properly ordained English clergyman? If so, do you understand what you are wanted for, what sort of house this is, and why they have brought you here?"

"I certainly believe that I understand, most distinctly; and as for my being ordained, I have been an English priest for seven-and-twenty years. I have held three livings in England—in Sussex, Warwickshire, and Hertfordshire—and this is the first time I have ever been asked a question which seems to throw doubt upon my qualifications. Is the lady ready? If so, I have my vestments without. I will immediately put them on, and if all is ready, since I have other engagements, it would be convenient for me at once to begin."

Mme. de Constal touched the bell which she had rung before. A door opened in an opposite corner of

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the room, from which a woman attired as a maid appeared.

"Antoinette, will you please ask Mademoiselle Hudson to enter?"

Antoinette vanished. There was an interval, during which the Rev. Mr. Hayes continued to look about him with the same vague air, as of a person who was looking for he knew not what. He made a suggestion, in a whisper, as if it were a matter of the extremest privacy.

"I will go and robe myself, with your permission."

He returned through the door through which he had previously come. As soon as he was gone, Mme. de Constal said :

"I trust, Mr. Dennett, that the Rev. Mr. Hayes has satisfied any doubts you may have had."

Ronald uttered a sound which might have been meant for a laugh of contempt. The tone in which he spoke went well with it.

"Satisfied? You must take me for a simpleton. Do you know the only thing that would satisfy me? That you should allow me to call your guests up here, and request them to inquire into the bona fides of that person, and that paper of yours; and if they are satisfied, probably I shall be. As things are, my only feeling is that that fellow is one of yourselves, and that you are all conspiring together in what seems to be a clumsy attempt at deception."

"That is your opinion, is it, Mr. Dennett?"
Mme. de Constal seemed to be amused. "What a

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shrewd young man you are! Here is our dear Alice. She may be able to inspire you with a confidence which we cannot do."

Antoinette had opened the door in the corner, and remained standing, with the handle in her hand, while Miss Hudson entered. She was dressed in a gown of soft silk, of so light a blue as to be almost white. A long train spread out behind her. As she moved, little blue satin shoes peeped out from under the hem.

"You see," said Mme. de Constal, as if she introduced her, "our dear Alice is dressed for the wedding. Does she not make a lovely bride?"

Ronald's heart seemed to be bounding in his bosom as he admitted that she did. The exquisite gown she wore became her fair hair and skin, making, as it seemed to him, her delicate beauty still more ethereal. Her cheeks were white. Her lovely eyes seemed to be distended, as if with fear, either of what was past, or of what was still to come. Her lips were pressed tightly together. She held herself with a curious rigidity, moving as one who walked in a dream. The instant she was in the room her eyes found Denton. She seemed to start, to draw back, to gasp for breath. A spot of scarlet appeared on either cheek.

"Does not the bridegroom," asked Mme. de Constal, "advance to meet his bride? My dear Alice, let me lead you to him."

When advancing she would have taken her by the hand and led her forward, the girl stood still.

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"No, please—please don't." Her lips were trembling. "Robert," she murmured, as if unconscious that she used his Christian name. "They told me—that you wished—to marry me."

Denton was silent. The working of his features showed how difficult it was for him to find words which would explain the situation without hurting her feelings. When he did speak, it was with that stiffness which seemed a characteristic of his in moments of deepest emotion.

"I hope they've not been ill-treating you."

The words seemed to be unexpected; her eyes seemed to open still wider.

"They have not—they have not—been very kind."

Her reply, and all that it implied, seemed to rouse in him a sudden flame of passion. For the first time he moved towards her.

"Tell me what they've been doing to you."

Mme. de Constal intervened, with an air of graceful amusement.

"My dear Alice, don't be silly; don't let your imagination run away with you. I'm sure the intention of everyone in the Château d'Ernan has been to be kind to you, to show you every possible kindness. All we want is to have you happily married." She turned to Achille: "See if Mr. Hayes is ready."

Achille opened the door. Mr. Hayes entered, looking, in surplice, stole and hood, more clerical than he had done before. Antoinette, who had remained in the room, pushed forward a sort of reading

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desk, behind which he took his stand, placing on it an open prayer book. Mme. de Constal turned to Ronald.

"Come, Mr. Dennett, give Alice your hand."

"That I will do willingly, without any prompting from you. Kindly get out of my way, Mme. de Constal, and don't you venture to touch me, or Miss Hudson either."

Brushing unceremoniously past his hostess, planting himself directly in front of the girl, Mr. Denton took her right hand in both of his.

"Do you understand this mockery they propose to go through, this mockery of a pretended marriage? Have they explained it to you? Does it meet with your approval?"

Mme. de Constal answered before words could come to the girl. Ronald's touch seemed to have had upon her an extraordinary effect. Her cheeks flamed; tears had come into her eyes, she trembled.

"He is such an incredulous person, your husband that is to be, dear Alice. It is not proposed to go through any mockery of marriage. As if in my presence I would allow anyone to mock at sacred things!" In spite of her apparent wish to be serious, her voice all at once assumed a sort of satirical intonation. "You are about, my dear Alice, to be joined in the bonds of holy wedlock, as it is so beautifully phrased by the Church. The marriage which will presently be celebrated will be as valid as if it were celebrated in St. Paul's Cathedral—where,

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by the way, if you like, afterwards you can be married again. Come, young people, we are losing time. Is everything ready, Mr. Hayes?"

"Everything," replied that personage. "I but wait the convenience of this young lady and gentleman."

His tone was a little austere, as if he felt that he was being slighted.

"Come, then, Mr. Hayes, begin. These two children are quite ready."

Ronald Denton expressed himself in an entirely different sense.

"You are a very persevering person, Mme. de Constal. You seem to think that we are puppets to be twisted round your finger. I have not the slightest intention of taking part in what, call it as you please, is nothing but a sacrilegious mockery, and I am quite sure that if Miss Hudson understands the position, neither has she."



CHAPTER XXV

RONALD AT BAY

MADAME DE CONSTAL gave no direct reply; she merely glanced at M. Perret and at Achille. As if her glance were a signal, Perret, moving forward, gripped Mr. Denton by both arms, so quickly that he had him fast before his intention was suspected. Just as rapidly Achille moved towards him from behind. Before the valet could reach him the young man made a violent effort to disengage himself. For once in a way fortune was on his side. Perret, slipping on the polished floor loosed his grasp for an instant—Denton was away. Achille, making a snatch at him, not seeing quite clearly in his haste what he was doing, collided with his friend. Mme. de Constal, springing forward, tried to arrest Ronald in his flight across the room. Without hesitation, Denton, straightening his arm, struck at her with all his force; as it chanced, the blow lighted on the point of her chin. She went down on to the floor with a cry, and where she fell she lay. Denton, gaining the other side of the table, against which he had leaned, and snatching up the flat mahogany case which he had noticed, tried to open the lid. It was locked. Re-

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gardless, in his consciousness of the value of moments, of everything but his desire to get at the contents, he raised the case above his head, and brought it down with all his force against the edge of the table—not once, but twice, till the woodwork was broken all to pieces. Two shining things fell out; as he had expected, a pair of revolvers.

Perret and Achille had delayed for an instant to learn what had befallen Mme. de Constal. Denton's movements had been so swift that that instant was enough. Picking up the revolvers, he held one in either hand before, realising what he was doing, they were on him. By then it was too late; he was not so defenceless as they had supposed he would be. He pointed the weapons at their heads.

"You know as well as I do," he cried, "that they are loaded. If you move another step I'll fire."

As if taken aback the two men paused. Achille cried:

"Why did you leave that case where he could get at it?"

"How do you suppose," retorted M. Perret, "that I ever imagined he would be able to get at it?"

Mme. de Constal was raising herself from the floor.

"Rush at him," she urged. "He can't hit you both."

The consideration, however, that he might hit one seemed to restrain them. They remained where they were.

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"Put those things down," roared Perret. "We want to do you no harm."

"You move and I'll do you harm," rejoined the gentleman.

The woman whom they called Antoinette, perceiving that the position was desperate, had performed a flank movement, and was coming towards him from behind. Before he guessed her purpose she had him by one arm. Another instant and he would have been at their mercy. But, quick as lightning, swinging himself loose, wheeling, he fired at the woman while she was still within reach of him. She gave a wild scream and, staggering back against the wall, gave utterance to shriek after shriek as if possessed. For once the veneer of suavity fell from Achille. He rushed at Denton with a bellow like a bull. Again the young man fired. At that distance he could hardly miss. The valet would have dropped to the floor, had he not in falling come in contact with M. Perret, who was close behind, and who, almost willy-nilly, had to hold him up.

"I am done," gasped Achille. "He's plugged me in the shoulder! The cursed English pig!"

The momentary silence which followed was broken by the shrill tones of the Rev. Mr. Hayes.

"For Heaven's sake, gentlemen, for all our sakes, be careful what you do. Matters are bad enough without making them worse. I won't stay and see murder done before my eyes."

Mme. de Constal addressed Antoinette, who still

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continued to shriek; the smile had gone from her eyes, and her tones were shrill.

"Antoinette, you fool, stop that noise! They will hear. We shall have the whole place about our ears. Nothing very serious has happened to you, or you wouldn't make that noise. Where did he hit you?"

Thus adjured, the woman, ceasing to shriek, seemed to consider.

"I don't know where he hit me; I know he's broken my arm, and I believe my leg. I think the bullet went right through me." Then with a sudden burst of fury she added: "Hasn't anyone got a gun that we can use on him? Madeline, where do you keep your vitriol? Use that."

Mme. de Constal moved towards a table which stood before the fireplace. Denton had caught the words, pregnant with such hideous significance.

"Be careful, Mme. de Constal, what you are doing. I do not wish to fire at a woman unless I can help it."

Heedless of his words, she dashed at the table, dragged open a drawer, snatched from it a bottle. The instant he saw it in her hand he fired, with so true an aim that the bottle was smashed to atoms. Mme. de Constal started a series of yells which more than rivalled those in which Antoinette had been indulging. The dreadful contents of the bottle had fallen on her naked hand, and was burning the flesh to the bone. Without standing on the order of his going, the Rev. Mr. Hayes ran towards the door,

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gathering up his surplice as he went as a woman gathers up her skirts. Perret, still supporting Achille, rained a volley of curses at Ronald, as if in the hope that they would sear him as the vitriol had done Mme. de Constal. The young man confronted him unmoved, speaking when at last the other gave him a chance.

"If I riddled you with bullets, M. Perret, I should do no more than you deserve; but as I don't want to play the part of executioner I shall recommend you to take yourself off, and with you the man you are holding, and those two women. The day of reckoning has come, and you are going to be called to account."

Scarcely had the young man's words been uttered than the door through which the reverend gentleman had retired was thrown open, and a man whom Denton had never seen before came dashing in, in a state of almost frenzied agitation.

"Quick! all of you, they're coming!"

Perret turned to him, as if he needed no one to explain who "they" were.

"You are sure of it?" The man almost danced with the excitement engendered by the doubt which the other's question conveyed.

"Sure of it? Am I sure of it? For what kind of an idiot do you take me? However, it's your affair, not mine. The rest are already gone; I go also; you can stay if you choose."

The man had gone with the same unceremonious

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swiftness with which he had come. His exit was followed by silence. Mme. de Constal ceased to scream, Antoinette to whine, Achille to groan.

"Can you walk?" asked M. Perret of the valet. "Madeline, I follow you; you know what we agreed. Do you suffer much?"

"Do I suffer? What do you suppose? Look!" She stretched out her hand, which, just now so white and shapely, was black and horrible.

"Poor Madeline!" cried Perret; one would not have supposed that his voice was capable of so much sympathy. "However, I fear that no good end will be gained by staying."

"Do you think that I don't know it?—if the moment has come. Antoinette, are you ready?"

"As ready as I ever shall be." The woman spoke sullenly. "But I will not go without Achille."

"Achille shall go!" exclaimed Perret. "I will carry him."

Lifting Achille in his arms, M. Perret bore him towards the door as if his weight was a thing of no account. The man who had so suddenly come and gone had left the door wide open. Perret paused with his burden for a moment on the threshold, turning to Mme. de Constal.

"Come," he said; then, bearing his burden with him, he disappeared from sight. Antoinette went staggering after him. Mme. de Constal, left alone, eyed the two young people. If words could have scorched, they would have been withered—she seemed

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to breathe forth the concentrated essence of rage as if the whole of the evil forces in her nature raged together within her.

"You think you have conquered. We shall see!" She turned to Denton. "As for you, the hangman's hands will tie you, his foot will kick the bolt, you will swing into eternity at the end of a rope—and may hell receive you! They'll cut you down and burn your body with quicklime, and your name will be a byword to all decent folk—as the man who murdered his friend, and then ran away to save his life. I will be revenged on you—you won't conquer in the end." She turned to Alice, with the swiftness with which a snake turns. "As for you, you slut, the worst I can wish you is that you may become his wife; he'll make you suffer more than I ever could have done. He'll bring you to such utter shame that you'll hide your pretty face lest men should recognise you as the wife of the man who ended his life upon the gallows. You ——!"

Words came from her lips with which one is unwilling to sully the page. She sprang at the girl as if she would have struck her with her dreadful hand. Alice shrank back, frightened, towards the corner of the room. Mme. de Constal made as if to follow her; Denton, rushing forward, interposed.

"I once before warned you to be careful, Mme. de Constal. If you attempt to touch Miss Hudson, I'll shoot you like the wild beast you are."

When Mme. de Constal saw the pointed revolver

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and the expression on the face of the man who held it, she apparently concluded that hers was a position in which discretion was the better part of valour. Without uttering another word, she turned and left the room, through the door which still stood open. When she was through she closed it. Denton stood listening for a moment, then he tried the handle.

"As I supposed," he said, "it's fast."

He went to the door through which Alice had come with Antoinette. That also was fast. He struck it with the butt of the pistol.

"What's on the other side of this?" he asked.

The girl shuddered.

"The room in which they kept me prisoner. I don't want to go back to that; don't make me, please."

"But if you and I are prisoners together in here, what are we to do?"

"It will not be the first time that you and I have been prisoners together in the same room."

"That's true—but then the circumstances were different; that was only for half an hour. Now, who knows how long we may be shut in here, or how long it will be before they are able to find us?" Going to one of the embrasured windows, he drew aside the curtains; then went to the second and did the same; then to the third. "Do you know, I don't believe these are windows at all. The painted glass in them seems to be set against some solid background."

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"Antoinette told me," said the girl, "that this is known as the room which has no windows."

"Then how are we to attract the attention of those who are outside? In this great rabbit warren of a house, this room may be overlooked for days. I had a sort of notion that we were descending as we came to it; the room may be underground."

"I believe it is; I believe that all this part of the house is underground."

"Then, if that is the case, it looks very much as if we must be trapped. Where is that bell which Mme. de Constal rang, or seemed to ring?"

In the frame of the table before the fireplace was set the ivory pushpiece of an electric bell. He pressed it again and again, waiting for results, keeping his finger on it for several seconds at a time.

"Nothing happens; either the connection has been cut off, or it rings where there is no one to hear—who will hear. There is another bell beside the fireplace, let's try that." He tried it with similar results. "It doesn't look as if ringing were going to do us much good. All the same, we'll try again presently. It may be that ultimately a sound will reach the ear of someone who, wondering where it comes from and what it means, will start to find out. Here is a telephone; we will try that."

He lifted the receiver off an instrument which stood on the table into which was set the push-piece of the electric bell. He put it to his ear.

"Hullo! Hullo! No one answers. I wonder

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where it rings to; it's possibly a private telephone. It is connected with an operator with whom Mme. de Constal can get in connection when she pleases, and the operator chooses. Possibly at this moment the operator isn't there—or doesn't choose. Hullo! Hullo! It's no good. We'll try both that and the bell again a little later on. At present it looks as if we shall have to possess our souls in patience."

"I am so sorry; I hope you are not angry with me."

The girl spoke like a child who has done wrong and fears reproach.

"Angry with you? Why should I be angry?"

"You are so brave—if it had not been for you, I don't know what would have become of me."

As if conscious that her reply was not an answer to his question, she seemed to shrink away. His looks, even more than his words, conveyed the amazement which he felt.

"Please do not say I am brave. Brave! Me! If you only knew! And as for what might have happened to you, it seems to me that something sufficiently serious may happen still, unless we can find a way of escape from our prison."

He moved round the room, striking the walls as he went with the butt of one of the weapons which he still retained in his grasp.

"For all one can tell from the sound, these walls might have been hewed out of the living rock. I don't know how many doors there are; there are five

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which we can see, and they seem to be as solid as the walls. I wonder if there is anything in the place which could be used as a crowbar, to force them open."

He looked about him as if in search of the object which he named. She said, speaking with a timidity which seemed to be so great that she trembled :

"If you wouldn't mind, before—before you find what you're looking for, there is something which I should like to say to you."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SLOANE MILLIONS

SHE had her hand raised to her throat, as if fingering something which was concealed in the bosom of her dress, something of whose safety she was anxious to be assured, and which she was eager, yet afraid, to produce. He observed her, the sight of her affecting him more than all that had gone before. It was as though some magnetic current was established between the two, which drew him towards her, and which it needed all his strength to resist. So violent was the emotion which the contemplation of her produced that, as was usual, his manner seemed to harden, and his words to come with difficulty.

"What is it you wish to say to me? Is it nothing which will wait?"

His tone could hardly have been colder. It seemed to chill her, to add to her already sufficiently obvious tremors.

"I—I should rather like—to speak about it—to you now, if you don't very much mind. It's—it's something rather particular. At least, it—it seems particular to me."

Her finger-tips were still plucking at the top of her bodice.

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"What is it? If it is really something pressing and important, tell me what it is."

"It's—it's something which I found just before they took me upstairs to the room in which they kept me locked all night."

"That was it, was it? Mme. de Constal told me that you had a headache and would rather not come down to dinner."

"She never gave me the chance, she never said a word about it. She told me she wished to speak to me upstairs, and she took me to a room which I had never seen before. She showed me into it, saying that she would return presently; then she shut the door, and I saw no more of her, nor of anyone, until what I suppose was the middle of the night."

"Didn't they give you anything to eat?"

"No, nothing. And I was so hungry. You know I had really had no lunch. It was so dark; there were no windows in the room; it was underground, like this. When you go through that door"—she pointed to the one through which she had entered—"you pass along a little passage, and there, at the end, is the room in which I was. There were no lights, or at least I could not find them, and there I was sitting in the darkness, hour after hour, wondering what was going to happen to me next, when there began the most terrible uproar. I believe it came from in here. Shots were fired; people shouted; and oh, I don't know what happened; I am afraid to think. I thought that at any moment they might come in to me there."

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And after it was all over Mme. de Constal did come in. She carried a tray on which were some meat and bread, and some wine in a tumbler. Just before she entered half a dozen electric lights flamed up. I suppose she must have turned them on from outside, because I could see nothing by which they could be turned on in the room. While I ate, she—she went on at me."

"What had she to say to you then? the dear woman!"

"She talked to me about all sorts of things; I can't tell you everything. And I dare say most of the things she said weren't true. But—but she told me you were in great danger."

"That's true enough. Everyone's in danger who sets foot in her establishment."

"She made out that you were in danger of—of your life, and I don't know what else besides. She made out that the only way to save you was by—by my becoming your wife."

"As I have already remarked—the dear woman!"

"She—she worked on me in such a way that I promised that I would marry you this morning." Something which she seemed to see in his face might have caused her to make a sudden digression. "But that's not what I wish to say to you. What I wish to speak to you about is this."

She thrust her fingers into the neck of her bodice, which she had all this time been fingering, and with difficulty pulled something out of it. It was appar-

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ently a newspaper, or at any rate a part of one. She explained as she held it out to him, with a hand which was clearly shaking :

"It is part of a *New York Herald*. I suppose some of those people who came yesterday must have brought it with them, and put it down somewhere where it was unnoticed until I saw it. I had just picked it up when Mme. de Constal took me to that room. I had just time to hide it inside my dress before she came to me."

Her tone grew more serious, while her manner suggested that she was becoming more mistress of herself.

"When she had gone out of the room in the night, or this morning, whichever it was, she left the lights on—not for very long, but for a time. Directly she was gone I thought of the paper. I wanted something to—to divert my mind from what she had been saying—I suppose that's what made me think of it. I took it out and began to read it. Almost the first thing I saw was this."

She held the paper out, the tip of her finger marking a place on the page. He looked at it askance, made as if to move to take it, and seemed to change his mind. His air was almost sheepish.

"Tell me what it is, what it says."

"Won't you come and see for yourself?"

Appeal was in her eyes, her voice, her bearing. He seemed to be positively afraid. It was his turn to stammer.

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"I'd—I'd much rather you told me what it is, if you don't mind."

"But I want to show you what it is. Why do you stand that long way off? Put down those—those horrid things, and come here and let me show you."

He laid the "horrid things" down willingly enough, but an actual effort seemed to be needed to enable him to accept her invitation to decrease the distance which was between them. Perhaps it was because she saw the difficulty with which he seemed to move that, when he had taken half a dozen steps, she moved quickly across the space of floor which still divided them and went close up to him. She held the paper almost under his nose, her finger-tip still serving as a pointer.

"See—this is what I saw: 'The Sloane Millions still go begging. On the track of Alice Hudson.' It was my own name which caught my eye; I stared and stared at it, and couldn't make out what it was. Although it was my own name, of course, I never dreamt for a moment that it referred to me. But when I began to read I couldn't make it out at all. Won't you take the paper and read it for yourself? You're not even looking at it. Don't you take an interest in what I say?"

She spoke with what seemed to be an air of offence. His glance certainly was not fixed upon the printed page, it seemed to be riveted on her face, certainly not with an expression which suggested lack of interest. It was curious, now that they were close

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together, how her timidity seemed to have flown, and his to have assumed grotesque dimensions.

"I—I don't know what's the matter with me. I suppose I'm a bit knocked over by all that shooting business, but I'd much rather that you read to me what's in the paper if it wouldn't be giving you too much trouble."

On her countenance there instantly came an expression of alarm.

"Aren't you feeling very well? What a selfish wretch I am to be bothering you with my affairs when—when, of course, you can't be feeling well. But I don't see what there is I can do for you, I'm so helpless."

"Thank you, I'm feeling perfectly well, only just at the moment I don't feel quite up to reading; and anyhow I'd much rather you told me what the paper says, if—if it wouldn't be giving too much trouble."

"It's not a question of trouble; it's a question——" She stopped and considered him. "You are a little pale."

He tried to smile, and succeeded after a fashion.

"I assure you I'm all right, however I may look. Please will you tell me what's in the paper? Of course, if you won't——"

"Well, I will; of course, I will." As if spurred by something which was not quite obvious, she went on with a sudden volubility, a colour coming into her cheeks as she spoke. "It seems that I am the Alice Hudson referred to. That's the most amazing part

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of it, but I am. I must be. The whole story is most extraordinary. But it—it does shed a light on things which, to put it mildly—well, you know they've been very mysterious. Now I do begin to understand—after this."

She held out the paper as if to emphasise her words.

"I'll begin at the beginning. If you won't read it for yourself, you'll have to let me tell the story my own way."

"I shall be only too delighted."

"It will take a long time. I can't tell a story like a newspaper can."

"The longer the better; we are not pressed for time."

"It seems that a person named Andrew J. Sloane died not long ago in Chicago; the paper does not say exactly when, so I can't tell you. He left heaps and heaps of money. The paper talks of two million dollars as though it were only part of what he left. It seems that he was never married, and hadn't a relation in the world. He left all his money to one person, and that person was a man—John Hudson. When I saw that I jumped, because John Hudson was my father's name. I sat in that room, wondering what it meant, and what I was coming to. I was so—well, upset—you know the sort of feeling one gets when one has had a shock and expects that a still greater one is coming?—that I didn't dare to read on. But at last I did dare, and—oh, it was wonder-

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ful ! Won't you read what the paper says for yourself ? You see how I'm wasting time."

"I don't agree that you're wasting time. It gives me a chance of looking at you while you are talking, and—I don't call that a waste of time."

It was the nearest approach to a compliment which he had ever paid her. Her cheeks were dyed a vivid scarlet; she looked at him with startled eyes; then—he drew back; not she. He drew back as if fearful that too close neighbourhood might not only lead him into saying things which he did not mean to say, but into doing them—which would be much worse. She did not seem to resent his moving farther from her, perhaps because with some subtle feminine instinct she divined the reason. She went quickly on :

"I soon saw, as I read, that the John Hudson to whom the money had been left was my father. The paper tells you all about it. How, many years ago, he was captain of a ship named the *Alice*; my mother has often told me about it, it was christened after her. That was in the days before they were married, when she was still a girl. On this ship there was a stow-away. One day a young man was dragged out of the hold. The ship was bound for Boston. He had tried to get money to pay his passage to America, and had failed. Then he tried to work his passage, but nobody would let him. Finally, in desperation, he had stowed himself away. The *Alice* was a sailing ship; I remember hearing my mother say that it was the last sailing ship on which my father ever voyaged.

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They were several days out at sea, and for most of them that stowaway had been without food. He had not had the means to lay in anything like a proper store, and was nearly starved. He must have been nearly mad when they found him, with hunger and despair, and all sorts of things. He ran to the side of the ship, and before they guessed what he was going to do, had leaped into the sea."

The maiden paused. Her auditor was convinced that that paper could not have told the story more eloquently than she was doing.

"On no ship is a stowaway wanted, and on most ships they are treated very harshly when they are found. I believe there are ships which, if a stowaway is found in them and then jumps overboard, would just sail off, and never bother about such a trifle as stopping to pick him up. My father was not like that. When that stowaway jumped overboard he stopped the ship and had a boat launched which saved him, and brought him back to the vessel. When a ship reaches port, stowaways are handed over to the police. My father did not hand that stowaway over to the police; he not only let him go, he gave him five pounds to start the world with. There must have been something very fascinating about that stowaway to induce my father to do that, though he was always helping people who were in holes."

Again the girl paused, this time to sigh, as if the recollection of her father's tendency brought back painful memories.

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"My father never saw that stowaway again, and, as far as I can make out from the paper, the stowaway never saw him. But he never forgot the man who had not only saved his life but given him a start in the world. That stowaway was Andrew J. Sloane. When, at the end of his life, he was casting about in his mind for someone to whom to leave his millions, he thought of the captain of the *Alice*—John Hudson. He left every penny to him, and if it should turn out that John Hudson was dead, then to his wife and children. Here's where what is really the strangest part of the story begins."

"It seems to me that the part you have told already is pretty queer."

"That's nothing—at least I don't think it's anything to what follows. I imagine that Mr. Sloane must have died at about the same time at which my father was lost at sea. Of course, my father couldn't be found, and he never heard of the great fortune that had been left to him. The people whose duty it was to see that Mr. Sloane's will was properly carried out, traced the firm of shipowners in whose service my father was, and learnt from them that neither he nor the ship in which he had last sailed had ever been heard of again. They also learned that he had a wife, and got from the shipowners the last address at which they had heard of her. Those will people wrote to my mother, and the letter they wrote came back marked 'Address unknown.' Someone on their behalf went to Paris. The boarding-house which

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had turned her out was shut up—it had failed, of which I am glad to hear; it served them thoroughly well right.”

Sparks of anger came into the speaker's eyes.

“For ever so long nothing could be learned of my mother from anyone, until, it seems, the other day. Then they discovered that my mother was dead, and the house in which she died, and that she had had a daughter named Alice. And that, according to the paper, is all they had learned when it was printed. Now what's the inference? You know what inference means, don't you?”

She pointed the paper at him as if she had been addressing a question to a child in a class. In spite of himself he smiled.

“I think I have some vague notion of what it means.”

She seemed to resent that smile; there was reproach in her glance.

“I don't see what there is to laugh at even if you do; I'm sure it's serious enough, because, don't you see, they must have found out about my mother's death, and about her having a daughter, within probably a few days of Mme. Renaldi's having brought me here. So the inference is—you'll see what I mean in a moment—that instead of Mme. Renaldi's having brought me here, and Mme. de Constal's having taken me in, out of goodness of heart, it looks as if it were very much like a conspiracy between the pair of them. I didn't know—how could I know?—any-

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thing about the Sloane millions, but it looks very much as if they knew everything. So Mme. de Constal kept me here, without letting me see a paper, or write a letter, or go outside the grounds, to all intents and purposes a prisoner, because she wished to keep me in ignorance of the true state of affairs. And that's why she wanted to marry me to M. Perret."

"It undoubtedly does seem that that consideration might have weighed with them."

"It's not a question of seeming, it must have done, because, as I have felt over and over again, M. Perret must have had a reason for wanting to marry me, and what other reason could there possibly be? No doubt, when M. Perret had married me, sooner or later, in some artful way, they would have let me learn the truth, and then they understood that, at the very least, I would be willing to give them at least half my fortune if M. Perret would only keep away from me. I have not the least doubt that that was the idea, or something very like it, that was in their heads about him; but why they wanted me to marry you I cannot think. One mystery becomes clear as day in the light of what this paper says, but the other becomes more mysterious than ever. I can quite understand your not wishing to marry me; although—although it's not very flattering, anyone can guess the reason of that—but can you give me the slightest hint of why they should take such extraordinary steps to force you into marrying me—against your will?"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DENTON "DOSSIER"

DENTON hesitated; for some seconds the truth was on the tip of his tongue, but when it came to the very pinch he could not speak it. He could not tell this girl, especially in the first flush of the discovery she had just made, what manner of thing he was. That exposure must come he knew, and very soon, but he would rather that it came from other lips than his, and, if possible, when he was not there. She had said that he was brave, but he knew better; he lacked the courage to abase himself before the light that was in her eyes.

His answer was a juggling with words:

"Mme. de Constal seems to have had some very curious schemes in her head. You've got at the heart of one; perhaps before very long opportunity will give you the solution to another. I think it's almost time to try those bells again, and perhaps that telephone. I'll try again."

He turned his back on her so that he might do as he had said. His action seemed to occasion her surprise, and something else. She seemed to resent his turning his back, as if it conveyed a suggestion

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that his interest in her had ceased. Her manner more than hinted at what she felt.

"I think you might have troubled yourself to give me some sort of answer before you bothered about those bells again. I don't know what sort of good you expect to get by ringing them, or trying to ring them."

"I fancy I'm going to get none." He had tried the bell set in the table and the one in the wall, as it seemed, without result. He took the receiver off the telephone. "Hullo! Hullo!" he called. No answer came; the telephone was dumb. "The only thing which remains to be done, unless chance sends someone here to release us, is to see if I can't find something which will serve as a crowbar, with which I can force open the doors."

He glanced round the apartment. It was not easy to see all that it contained, but nothing caught his eye which seemed as if it would serve the desired purpose.

"There are fireirons in the fireplace; wouldn't you like to try the poker?"

The suggestion came from the lady, and seemed to be ironical. Ronald glanced at her, and then at the poker; he ignored the irony.

"I am afraid that will hardly do; we want something with some sort of an edge. What's in the drawers? I wonder if they're all locked."

One in the table by which he was standing was not, as was shown by his instantly pulling it open.

The Denton "Dossier"

It seemed to be filled with papers. A bundle of them, fastened together by a rubber band, caught his eye. It was on the top, and on the outside page was an inscription in such bold characters that he could hardly fail to see it: "Ronald Denton. Son dossier." He knew that *dossier* was a French legal term for which we have scarcely an English equivalent—it meant a number of papers, or facts, grouped together—dealing generally with the history of a particular individual, in which the whole of his life's record was laid bare. Why was his *dossier* in Mme. de Constal's drawer, in such a prominent position that he could scarcely fail to perceive it directly the drawer was opened? Taking up the bundle of papers, he stared at the inscription, as people sometimes stare at the address upon an envelope.

"What have you got there? What have you found in Madame de Constal's drawer?" The lady's voice came to him from the other side of the room.

"That's just what I'm wondering. It seems to be something about—someone I know."

"Does that mean that it's about me? Please speak up, I can scarcely hear you."

"As a matter of fact, I fancy that it's about me. I am just looking."

He had taken off the rubber band, and was glancing through the papers it had held together. He recognised the first with what might have been a sudden constriction of the heart. It was the warrant

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which he had taken out of Inspector Jenner's pocket. Mme. de Constal had kept it carefully by her. Almost unwittingly he unfolded it. He saw his own name—then something else. He read the whole thing carefully. It was a warrant to arrest Ronald Denton, of Buckingham Chambers, London, solicitor, for misappropriation of trust funds. He read it through again to make quite sure that nothing had escaped him. Nothing had. The charge, it seemed, on which he had been arrested was misappropriation of trust funds; nothing else. Inspector Jenner had not told him for what he had arrested him; he had not asked, he had taken it for granted. There was no mention of murder on the warrant. What did it mean? Had not Inspector Jenner arrested him for the murder of Edward Osborne? And if not, why not? What was this charge of misappropriating trust funds compared to the other? Especially as this was a charge which he could easily disprove.

The lady's voice came again to him from across the room—in more insistent tones even than before—as if she were impatient.

"What are you staring at? Why don't you tell me what you've got there? How secretive you are! it's always the same, I tell you everything, and you tell me nothing. What are you reading?"

Not for anything could he have told her at that moment that he was reading a warrant for his own arrest. It was beyond his power. The way in which his heart was thumping against his ribs made him

The Denton "Dossier"

more powerless still. "I—I was looking through a paper," he stammered.

"A paper! What paper? If it's anything very secret, pray keep it to yourself. I'll turn my back, as you turned your back on me just now, then I shan't be able to see."

The lady's petulance seemed to go unnoticed. He appeared to ignore the fashion with which she turned her shapely back to him; he was reading a paper which had for him a fascination which constrained him to ignore everything. It was the story of his own life, told in a sort of *précis* form, written in French by a correspondent in London. He was amazed at the accuracy of the record; by the neat way in which his character was hit off; his fondness for pleasure, his distaste for work. He came to the story of that memorable afternoon. It was told with a fidelity which astounded him. How could that unknown correspondent have learned these facts? But when he read what followed the story of that afternoon something seemed to happen to his head. The written words seemed to swim before him; it was with difficulty that he could follow them with his eyes.

What exactly was said he was not sure. At the moment, only the main facts penetrated his brain; the one great fact—that Edward Osborne was not dead. He had not killed him; he had struck him—as continually he had told himself ever since he had thoroughly deserved—the man had crumpled up upon the floor, motionless, an inert mass. He had taken it

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for granted that he was dead. His passion had been so great as to rob him of his judgment, both at the beginning of that interview and at the end. If he had stayed to see the matter out, he would have learned that there was practically nothing to face; at the worst only a case of common assault. But he had fled for his life—and in so doing what a fool he had been!

Inspector Jenner had not arrested him for murder; he had arrested him, seemingly on Osborne's information that he had been concerned with him in the fraud of which he alone had been guilty. He could not tell what exactly that information had been, but he could swear that it was false. If he had only known! If his conscience had not played him so foul a trick! Half a dozen words and the matter would have been made clear. He would never have left the inspector to burn in that railway carriage, which meant that he would never have fallen from the frying-pan into the fire. He had certainly fallen into the fire when he passed from the inspector's hands into Mme. de Constal's. The inspector might have shown pity; she had shown none.

The probability was that practically from the very first she had known the truth; and how she had used it, how she had dangled his own fears before his eyes, encouraging, as it were, the burden of his shame to weigh him down.

And all the time he had been practically guiltless—wholly guiltless—but if the chance had recurred he would have struck Osborne again. He need fear

The Denton "Dossier"

nothing; no one could do him hurt, no one bring him to shame. He could hold up his head with the best of them. He was an innocent man.

An innocent man! That meant—that meant——

Ronald looked round at the lady on the other side of the room. It seemed that she still was put out with him, her face was turned from him, she presented a pretty view of her back. He spoke to her :

"Alice!"

It might have been his imagination which caused him to think that at the sound of his voice she started. Apparently she did not mean to hear. Moving towards a chair, she gave it an ostentatious twist, and placed herself on it, with nothing of her for him to look at but a view of her back hair. He did not seem to mind in the least; he actually laughed. At the sound of his laughter she certainly started. He spoke to her again :

"Alice!" Then in humble tones he added : "I'm very sorry I did not answer your question when you asked it, but there are such strange things in these papers I have found that I simply couldn't. I had to read them first before I knew what to answer." He paused for her to speak—in vain. "Won't you speak to me, if—if it is not asking too much?"

"Oh, dear no, it's not asking too much. But, as I told you before, if what was in the papers which you got out of Mme. de Constal's drawer was secret, I have no wish to force myself upon your confidence; and that's all."

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"These papers explain why Mme. de Constal was so anxious that you should marry me."

"What!" His words had a surprising effect upon the lady. She not only jumped up off her chair, she turned right round to him. "Do you mean it—really? What is the explanation? I beg your pardon, perhaps still I ought not to ask."

"When I first made Mme. de Constal's acquaintance, I was a prisoner. I was, as I supposed, being taken to England on a charge of murder."

"What?" The lady's surprise, this time, was genuine; all trace of affectation was gone.

"The train was wrecked. The man who had arrested me was killed; I escaped. Mme. de Constal escaped also; she was a passenger in the same train. She knew I was a prisoner; she brought me here, not of my own free will. She kept me here, leading me to believe that if I once went outside her gates it would be to be taken to the gallows."

"I don't believe it—I can't believe it!"

"That's why she wished me to marry you—can't you see?"

"I don't see. Why—why—because of that—should she wish you to marry me?"

"She knew I was in love with you; she knew that from the moment I set eyes on you I was in love with you."

"That I know not to be true. How dare you say such a thing?"

"She knew that every moment I remained in your

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company I fell deeper in love. She knew that you had become all the world to me, that to me you were the only thing that mattered. She traded on my love for you—don't you see?"

"No, I don't. How dare you say such things to me? It—it isn't fair."

She pressed her hands to her bosom, as if there were something there which hurt.

"When you wouldn't marry Perret—as if you ever could have married such a scoundrel!—she thought she saw a better way. She knew that I was head over heels in love with you——"

"How could she know it? You never told her. Did you tell her?"

"As if she didn't know without my telling her—as if every creature in the house didn't know it, from Achille to Mme. Lamotte. Everyone but you."

"You never told me."

"Don't you see that that was what she wanted me to do? She wanted me to marry you, meaning, directly we were married, to put the screw on both of us. She knew about old Sloane's money, she knew that the best way to get a good slice of it for herself was to have us man and wife. We should have been at her mercy. I don't know quite how the thing was going to be worked, but no doubt she meant to screw money—your money—first of all out of me, by pretending to keep my whereabouts hidden from the police; then, when I failed, she no doubt proposed to screw money out of you by telling you what I had

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done, and making you pay her for saving me from the gallows. Now do you see why she wanted us to marry?"

"I—I'm beginning to have some sort of an idea, but—but it's all so dreadful."

"Like you, she never let me see a paper nor write a letter; she kept me in absolute darkness. I was a fool, and she practised on my folly. I thought I had murdered a man who—who deserved it, anyhow, but I hadn't! She knew I hadn't, but I didn't. Here are the papers to prove it. If I had only guessed at what she knew, at what was here"—he struck the "dossier" with his open palm—"I'd have talked to her; I'd have talked to the lot of them. Above all, I'd have talked to you."

"Pray what would you have talked to me about?"

"Don't you know?" Suddenly he moved towards her; he seemed to take her silence to imply a negative. "Then I'll tell you. Within, I should say, twelve hours of my meeting you, I should have told you that I loved you. That's what I should have talked to you about."

She seemed to be amazed, and also awed, by his sudden and surprising heat. She seemed to find a difficulty in meeting his eyes; she had been glaring at him only a minute before.

"I—I don't believe it. You are making fun of me. People don't do that sort of thing nowadays; they don't fall in love like that, especially with such an absurd creature as I am."

The Denton "Dossier"

"Don't they? Then I'm an exception to the rule, because I did. I fell in love with you the moment I met you on the staircase, I swear I did."

"How could you possibly? You only saw me for half a second, if you saw me at all. Don't be so ridiculous!"

"I fell in love with you when I met you on the staircase. I was head over heels in love with you before that first lunch was finished; you were all the world to me before we parted that afternoon on the terrace. If it hadn't been for—what I was afraid of—I'd have told you so within twelve hours. Though, as matters have turned out, it is as well I didn't."

"What do you mean by that? How you do jump about from point to point. Why is it just as well you didn't? I don't see."

"Not after what's in the paper that you've just been telling me about?"

"What's in the paper? What do you mean?"

"Haven't you just been telling me you're the sole heiress of a multi-millionaire? Then am I the sort of person you ought to marry? Your own common sense must tell you better than that?"

"Of all the inconsistent persons! What—what has that to do with it? First of all I'm not sure that I am the Alice Hudson that's wanted."

"I don't wish to say anything offensive, but that is a deliberate untruth, because you are sure."

"Of all the rudeness! But if I am—what difference does it make if I am?"

Love in Fetters

"If you can't see, I'm afraid I should only incur your displeasure by trying to explain. What we have to do is to get out of this prison. I must try to find something which will serve as a crowbar."

"You will do nothing of the kind." He had moved away, but she, rushing after him, placed herself directly in his way. "Will you stand still!" Since he could not advance without thrusting her aside he had to. "Will you answer my question? If, for once in your life, you are capable of answering a plain question, answer one now—the one I'm going to put to you. Mind you do. Is what you've been telling me all stories?"

"I have never said anything to you which entitles you to ask me such a question."

"Well, do you love me? Answer me."

"You know—you know—that I love you."

"And you know—you know—that I love you."

"Alice!"

"Well? Is that all you've got to say? After all we have gone through together, have you nothing more to say to me than that? What kind of a heart you have I can't say, but do you think yourself entitled to break mine? I love you! I love you! I also fell in love with you when I met you on the stairs, and—and—oh! don't be so cruel. If you loved me as I love you, you—couldn't be! If you only knew how I have longed to hear you say that you loved me."

In an instant he had her in his arms, and she heard him say it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHAT JOSEPH COTON REMEMBERED

WHEN a young man and a young woman have reached the point to which those two young persons had come, they have so much to say to each other which they feel forced to say that they are apt to have no notion of how long they take in saying it. So absorbed were they in those observations which had to be made that it is not impossible they altogether overlooked the extraordinary position they were in. Certainly Mr. Denton did not try those bells again, nor did he test the telephone, nor did he search for something which would serve as a crowbar; on the contrary, he seemed not to be in the least degree anxious to get out of that apartment at all, nor to be conscious that he would find any difficulty in doing so if he so desired. And the lady was as oblivious as he was. Fortunately, there often does seem to be a something up aloft which watches over lovers, and not impossibly that something was watching then. For what they failed to do when they had tried, happened when they were not trying at all.

"What's that?" exclaimed the lady, when they were in the midst of telling each other some of the most remarkable things which a young man and a

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young woman ever did tell each other, and which so very many young men and women have told each other before. The young man looked round.

"It sounds—I believe there's someone trying the door outside."

He dashed off towards the table on which the pair of revolvers lay.

"Oh, Ronald!" He had told her his name was Ronald; it came from her pretty lips as if it were a name which she had had in constant use for years. "Don't touch those dreadful things! Don't!"

The gentleman had one in either hand.

"Suppose it is that woman back again, with her friends. Do you think I will let them find me powerless to defend you? Not much. You had better come and stand behind me, on the other side of this table; trust me to see that they don't touch you."

The lady obeyed, with a meekness which was wonderful. As she passed him, she bent her head towards his, and their lips touched; just touched, for almost in the same moment she was standing on the other side of the table, presenting a really pleasing picture of agitation.

"Ronald, don't shoot if you can help it."

"You may be sure I won't. All the same I've got to make them understand that I will shoot if they try to play any more of their tricks. Look out! The door is opening! They're coming in."

The door did open, and they came in; but the persons comprised in the "they" were not at all those

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they had feared, yet half expected. In front was an individual at whom Denton had to stare for several seconds before he realised that he had seen him once before. The lady, however, recognised him on the instant.

"Why, it's Joseph Coton! M. Coton, whatever are you doing here? And who are these people? Are they more friends of Mme. de Constal?"

It was Mr. Denton who answered; his air was slightly grandiose.

"These, my dear Alice, are the ladies and gentlemen who arrived yesterday as Mme. de Constal's guests. Let me introduce them. Mrs. Stacey, allow me to introduce to you Miss Alice Hudson."

Mrs. Stacey, who had been hanging on her husband's arm, with an expression on her vivacious countenance which suggested consciousness of the magnitude of the adventure on which they were engaged, at the sight of the girl in her dainty gown, had advanced with outstretched hands to greet her. But when Ronald mentioned her name, she stopped, stared, and gave a sort of little squeal.

"What name did you say?"

Ronald repeated himself, with a difference.

"This, Mrs. Stacey, is Miss Alice Hudson, with whose name, I believe, you are not unfamiliar. I believe you have heard of the late Mr. Andrew J. Sloane?"

Mrs. Stacey's attitude was suggestive of something more than surprise; she was a live note of exclamation.

Love in Fetters

"Heard of him? Why, Andrew J. was my George's partner. I heard enough about him while he was alive, but since he died it seems to me I've heard of nothing else—except Miss Alice Hudson." Mrs. Stacey moved a step nearer to the girl. "Are you the Alice Hudson who is mentioned in this paper?"

"I believe I am. At least, I believe I'm that Alice Hudson."

"Well, of all the——!" The lady stopped short to address her husband.

"George, isn't she a peach—isn't she a picture? Haven't I always said to those that have shall be given? With a face and figure like that she wouldn't need a cent, and now she's got that pile of Andrew J.'s. Isn't it just the last thing?"

Mr. Stacey advanced towards the girl with his hand held out.

"If you are Miss Alice Hudson, the daughter of the late Captain John Hudson, permit me to shake you by the hand. Your father sort of made Andrew J. Sloane, and Andrew J. Sloane made me, so you see I owe you something which can't exactly be expressed in words. I am very pleased to see you, Miss Hudson—very, very pleased indeed."

With the greatest solemnity Mr. Stacey shook the maiden's hand.

The grey-headed man who had been addressed as Colonel Gardner was among those who had followed Joseph Coton. He spoke to Ronald Denton.

What Joseph Coton Remembered

"I believe your name is Denton—Ronald Denton."

The young man looked at him. "I believe I heard someone remark that you were in some way connected with the police. Does that mean——?"

The young man left his question unfinished. The other shook his head and smiled.

"No, it doesn't; it might have done once, but it doesn't now. I believe, Mr. Denton, you have been out of England for some little time, and that therefore you may be, as regards news, a little behind the times. I don't know if you are aware that your—partner, Mr. Edward Osborne, who has been arrested on a charge of misapplying certain trust funds which had been confided to his keeping, has made a full confession, in which he has exonerated you entirely. It is possible that your presence may be required as a witness, but that is not certain; it will certainly not be wanted for any other purpose. All allegations against you, of every sort and kind, have been withdrawn."

"Thank God!" The young man, as he held himself straighter, seemed to open his chest and throw something off his shoulders. "Alice, you hear that?"

"Of course I heard; but, of course, I should have known how it would be if I hadn't heard. Do you suppose I don't know you well enough?"

The question was rather presumptuous, but the gentleman only smiled; possibly a little too conscious of the integrity of his own intentions.

Colonel Gardner was looking about him curiously.

Love in Fetters

"So this is the apartment of which the world has heard so many stories, the famous room without windows. What queer things have been done in here! I take it that you have no idea of what has become of Mme. de Constal and her friends."

"I have not the vaguest notion. Someone came rushing in, giving them what I suppose was a signal of alarm about something, and Mme. de Constal and her friends disappeared. I don't know how long ago that was; we've been prisoners here ever since."

Gardner looked at the girl, and again he smiled. Possibly he felt that the term of imprisonment had not been without alleviations. He turned to Joseph Coton.

"You have brought us here, and in so doing have rendered Mr. Denton and Miss Hudson a service, but there still remains the question of Mr. Spragg. Where is that—chamber of which you spoke?"

M. Coton moved across the room. He stood peering at what seemed to be the solid wall.

"It's some time since I've been here, a long time, and then I was only in this room perhaps once."

"Your knowledge of the geography of the place would seem to point to a rather more intimate acquaintance than that, M. Coton."

Coton turned and eyed the speaker. Denton now remembered him quite well. This was the man who had stood on the other side of the wire fence that afternoon, and who had primed him with such unflattering stories about Mme. de Constal and the

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Château d'Ernan. He was regarding Colonel Gardner with the evil grin which Ronald recalled as his chief characteristic.

"If you're hinting anything against my character, I'll not have it. My character is well known in all this country-side."

"So I should imagine."

"And so you may imagine." The grin grew more pronounced. "It's no news that I once lived at the Château d'Ernan, but that was in Monsieur's time, before the woman whom he was fool enough to marry murdered him. It's been nothing but a den of thieves since then, and worse, no place for an honest man. I haven't been in this room since the woman had it. There were some nice goings on in here in Monsieur's time; but compared to what happened afterwards——Bah!"

He rounded his sentence off by the utterance of a very singular sort of a grunt. There was a momentary pause before the other spoke.

"Does all this mean that you've forgotten where that room was, and the way into it, and that you were bragging when you said you hadn't?"

"We'll soon see if I've forgotten. Mind you, I never said I was certain sure; it was so long ago. Only don't you hint that I know more about the place than I ought. Now, let's see."

Where Coton stood, a picture was painted in fresco on the wall, representing some amorous scene in the Olympian days. Carved beadings ran round it, serv-

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ing as a sort of frame. Coton moved his hand up and down that part of the beading which was on the right of the picture. His lips were moving. He seemed to be making certain measurements with the palm of his hand, which he recorded to himself under his breath. Presently his hand ceased moving.

"It's here. I knew it was somewhere here. Now let me see; you turned it round, but whether to the right or left I don't remember. I've got it. I knew I'd recall the trick of it if I got the chance. There!"

He had gripped perhaps seven or eight inches of the beading and twisted it out of place. Where it had been was a narrow opening in the solid wall, into which he thrust his fingers.

"There you are! Done it again! Who says that I've forgotten?"

He had drawn, apparently by sheer strength, a block of wood, perhaps five or six inches square, out of the wall. He held it in his hand. Colonel Gardner and the others crowded round to look. Coton was pointing to what the block of wood had hidden.

"You see that metal plate? It's opened by a spring. Press the spring and the plate flies back on a hinge, like that! and behind is the handle of a door. You've only got to turn it, and pull, and you see what happens."

What did happen when he pulled was that the picture divided in half. It rose from the floor to a height of seven or eight feet. There had not been a trace of any division until Coton had pulled; now it

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was so obvious that it seemed incredible it should not have been noticed.

"Here, monsieur, is the room of which I spoke to you. What it was meant for, when it was built, I can't say; but they do tell some queer stories. Would monsieur like to be the first to enter?"

It seemed that monsieur would. Colonel Gardner, accepting the invitation conveyed by the sweep of Coton's hand, passed through the opening he had disclosed. The instant he was in, he uttered an exclamation.

"Hullo! Spragg! Is that you? Poor old man! What infernal mischief have they done to you?"

When the others came crowding in they found an apartment which was not unlike a modern padded room. In one corner was a bed of sorts. On it lay a man, gagged, blindfolded, pinioned. It was impossible that anything human could have been rendered more helpless. The thing was the work of an artist. Cords ran round him, securing his legs and arms; a bandage was across his mouth; another across his eyes. As if that had not been enough, he had been tied to the bed on which he lay.

"Why, Spragg!" exclaimed Mr. Stacey, so surprised at the sight which he presented as to be apparently unconscious of the banality of his own remark. "That woman, Mme. de Constal, said that you'd gone away. Did she dream it, or was she just a liar?"

CHAPTER XXIX

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

MR. THOMAS SPRAGG was not dead; but he had had a bad time. He was wont to speak of it in the years that followed as the very worst time he had ever had in his life, and he had had some pretty bad ones. What galled him perhaps most was that he had been trapped so neatly. He had laid such excellent traps for others; those others had slipped through them—it was he who had been caught.

It is to be feared that Mme. de Constal had been guilty of her husband's murder; that she owed her escape to the skill with which her counsel had played upon the sentimental side of a jury of her susceptible fellow-countrymen. Where a pretty woman is concerned a French jury is loth to convict. Although they must often be married men themselves, they constantly let off interesting-looking females who, they must be aware, have killed their husbands.

M. Maximilien de Constal was not by any means all that a husband ought to be, from any point of view. But then, on the other hand, Mme. de Constal was not an ideal wife. She certainly was not entitled to sit in judgment on her other half's shortcomings; still less, because he was not all he might have been,

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to kill him. Nothing is ever likely to be certainly known about the details of the crime, but the presumption is that she had two accomplices at least. One, the active one, was Léon Perret. Probably he was the third person who was taking part in the disturbance which attracted so much notice in the small hours of the morning; in all probability it was he who, with or without madame's active assistance, killed the old man. The man we have known as Achille was M. de Constal's body-servant. Almost beyond a doubt he was the second accomplice. Probably the part he played was that of a looker-on. He might have saved his master if he had chosen, but he did not choose; and so shared the guilt of the others. Even at the trial he might have spoken the truth; he preferred to tell lies, and did tell them, and stuck to them with a face of brass; no doubt for solid reasons of his own. So justice miscarried, and Mme. de Constal was acquitted.

Old de Constal had not only made a settlement on his wife, he had left practically everything of which he died possessed to his widow. Mme. de Constal retired to the famous old house which had been in the de Constal family for so many generations; and she was accompanied there by a remarkable set of associates. There was M. Léon Perret, whom, of course, she dared not offend, even if she had wanted to; there was Achille, who had her between his finger and thumb; there was Antoinette, who had been Mme. de Constal's maid, and was Achille's sweet-

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heart, and who, no doubt, knew enough. There was also the Comte de Girodet, who had been a very good friend of the lady's in her earlier days, and who chose to attach himself to her now. To these, later, others were joined, male and female scamps of all sorts and kinds, and of nearly all countries. The Château d'Ernan became one of the centres of the world's rascality.

On the face of it, Madeline de Constal had been left a very handsome property; as a matter of fact, she was the owner of, as it were, nothing but the bare bones. Her extravagance had been one of the causes of her constant quarrels with her husband. Her debts were enormous; when they were paid there was not only very little left in hard cash, but money had been borrowed on the security of her real estate; until, as Mr. Joshua Krauss had more than hinted, she owned nothing that was really hers. So long as the interest on the moneys lent was paid, she was allowed to continue in possession; but the interest had to be paid. And it was the necessity to find money with which to pay the interest which was the original cause of so many singular doings.

There were very few phases of criminality which were not represented at the Château d'Ernan. What actually wrecked the enterprise was the establishment they set up for coining false money. A regular mint was carried on, conducted on the most scientific principles. Silver was melted down, brought to the proper standard, and silver coins were turned out in

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vast quantities, which were in every respect equal to those issued by the authorised mints. Since scarcely any of the silver used was paid for, this was not difficult. They had their agents in all parts of the world. Wherever silver was stolen, whether in the form of plate, or any other form, it was shipped to the Château d'Ernan and paid for in the silver coinage of the country from which it came. Since in every hundred pounds minted there was a profit of more than seventy-five per cent. this was not a bad business for those who managed it at the Château d'Ernan. Governments in all parts of the world found that silver coins were passing from hand to hand which were practically the same as those which were issued by themselves, but of which their own mints knew nothing. Little was said in public; the imitations were in every respect so good that it was felt that to say too much might produce a general feeling of unrest, even to the extent of dislocating the commercial standard; only the police of all countries were on the look-out to discover the source from which these coins were coming.

It speaks volumes for the adroitness with which the thing was managed and the organisation which was at the service of the management, that they were baffled for so long. The way in which suspicion was first aroused shows that in the finest criminal methods there is always some weak point.

M. de Girodet occupied a strong position at the Château d'Ernan, and in one way he was worth it.

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It is singular how easy it is to make acquaintances at certain fashionable resorts. M. de Girodet would go to Biarritz, Cannes, Nice, Monte Carlo, Aix les Bains, Homburg, Ostend, even St. Moritz in the winter, and there his charm of manner and fine, old-world courtesy would quickly make him one of the most popular persons in the place. Mme. de Constal would be hovering in the background. She would join in the circle of his acquaintance. One thing would lead to another. When the time for parting came, it was easy to point out what a pity it was that so many pleasant folk should separate, perhaps for ever. Then on a sudden there would come a happy suggestion from Mme. de Constal. Why not, before the final separation took place, pay her country house a visit? It was extraordinary how many of these people received the suggestion with rapturous acclamation. She would have a house party of persons who, for the most part, had got money in their pockets, or within easy reach.

Those were delightful parties at the Château d'Ernan. Everything was done in perfect style, and if the guests found it a trifle expensive that was by the way; one had to pay sometimes for good entertainment.

All the people who went to the Château d'Ernan were fond of play, and they played. M. de Girodet was the presiding spirit. It is doubtful if one of those persons who played with him ever knew what a skilful player he was; his skill was so great that they

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did not even suspect how great. Some of the guests won, some of them even quite decent sums; but the sums which were won were but drops in a pond to the sums which were lost.

On one occasion they played roulette for five-franc pieces—just a little nursery game; no higher stake was allowed. One of the players, a lady, was a considerable winner; she actually left the château with more than a hundred five-franc pieces in her possession. One morning, soon after she reached Paris, a well-spoken gentleman called on her at her hotel, and laying several five-franc pieces before her on a table, asked her where she had got them from. He was a collector of five-franc pieces, he said, those were unique coins, so he declared, minted after a fashion which was no longer in vogue—the machine which made them was no longer in existence. The differences were so minute as to be visible only to the eye of a collector, but there they were. Would she mind telling him from where she had obtained these pieces so that he might be able to secure some more.

The lady laughed; she treated him as an amiable maniac, told him about her luck at the Château d'Ernan, showed him the five-franc pieces which remained. He selected several, for which he actually paid her seven francs fifty apiece, which, of course, meant for her a handsome profit. She was delighted. There are few things a woman loves better than a bargain, and she had obviously made an excellent one. The visitor, when he left, seemed contented also.

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Within a very few minutes of the visitor leaving the hotel a certain representative of the Château d'Ernan, a M. Jules Monteil, knew all about that transaction in five-franc pieces, and within a very few hours that collector of coins was found in a café, dead. Apparently poison had been put into a cup of coffee which he had just swallowed, but by whose hand was never certainly known. Whoever was responsible for its presence was a little too late. That night all the chiefs of the Paris police knew about those five-franc pieces, and certain of them were on the look-out for M. Monteil.

M. Monteil seems rather to have lost his head. He tore back to the Château d'Ernan. We saw him there, standing in the great fireplace in the room without windows. He had a very clever scheme which he thought would insure his safety; it failed. He doubled back to the château with an agent of police at his heels. That agent was killed, his body was buried in the grounds. Ronald Denton, standing on the terrace, saw it being borne to its grave. But that agent did not count; killing him was no use. Officers from all quarters of France had eyes on the Château d'Ernan. Two English officers were actually among Mme. de Constal's invited guests. Mr. Thomas Spragg was one. But those who had the interests of the château at heart were not to be caught napping. As soon as his feet crossed the threshold his hostess was warned that he was there. That night she and her associates did their best to secure at least his tem-

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porary silence. No warning had reached them concerning Colonel Gardner.

The whole company of the associates would have shaken the dust of the château off their feet if it had not been for two things. They were rather short of actual cash. It was necessary that M. de Girodet should win; and he did win. Then there were Alice Hudson and Ronald Denton. Mme. de Constal and two or three of her immediate associates were extremely desirous that something should be made out of them. Alice Hudson represented such an enormous fortune, which they had already counted as being in their hands, that the thought that they were to get nothing out of her after all was unendurable.

Alice Hudson had been regarded by the associates as a true windfall, one of the greatest that had ever come their way. It was quite by accident that Mme. Renaldi, an insignificant member of the firm, had discovered the truth. In Mrs. Hudson's hands, as she lay dead, there had been an English journal. It was not unlikely that the shock of what she had read in it had been the actual cause of her death. Mme. Renaldi knew English. She had found the journal somewhere, she had heard from the landlady the story of where it had been. She glanced through it, and there was the story all set forth; in a very short time the penniless orphan was within the hospitable walls of the Château d'Ernan.

It was recognised that the essential thing to be done was to keep her in ignorance of the true state of

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affairs; to allow her to continue to believe herself without a farthing. That was easy. The second thing they tried to do was much more difficult. It was realised that the shortest way to her money was through the lady's marriage. Get her married to one of themselves, and her millions were at their mercy. So M. Léon Perret set out to woo her; with what results we have seen.

Ronald Denton was an accident, and the product of one. The original idea, when Mme. de Constal had him conveyed to her home, was that he might turn out useful—so many things did turn out useful at the Château d'Ernan. When M. Perret proved to be such a lamentable failure as a suitor, Denton's path to usefulness was clear. He was in love with the girl, and the girl with him; not that that would have mattered if it had not suggested to Madame that here was a second string—someone to fall back on.

As husband to the girl, he might be more useful than their original choice—if he was at all amenable. That he was not was one of their most grievous disappointments. They did not give up all hope till the very last moment. The Rev. Mr. Hayes was found, the mad scheme of that mock marriage was planned. If Ronald had not got hold of those revolvers he would have been drugged, and the girl would have been drugged. They would have been carried away with the conspirators, and afterwards they would have been made to believe that they were man and wife.

Ronald's finding of the revolvers made short work

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of that wild notion. Then there came the warning; the officers of the law were closing on the Château d'Ernan. It was a question of moments, if they wished to have a chance of saving themselves; and the strangest part of it was that most of them did save themselves. The French authorities are still wondering how it was done. When they came upon the scene the birds had flown; only the guests remained, and Colonel Gardner, and what was left of Mr. Thomas Spragg.

Certain minor members of that criminal society have been taken since; some of them a few hours afterwards, but the leaders are still at large. The authorities of most of the countries of the world are anxiously asking themselves where. The vanishing trick was very well done. There must have been some organisation which had charge of that sort of thing a long way in advance; that organisation did what was required of it extremely well. The Château d'Ernan is in the market. The men who had lent money foreclosed. The beautiful machinery for making silver coins was taken into custody. It has been destroyed; the building which had held it has been razed to the ground. From the Château d'Ernan and all that it stood for, the glory has departed. But the police, north, south, east and west, are still looking each other in the eyes, wondering who knows what has become of those who reigned there. Mme. de Constal, M. Léon Perret, M. de Girodet, Achille—are they alive or are they dead?

CHAPTER XXX

TWO WIVES

THEY were married at a little old church in the City. Mr. and Mrs. Stacey, Sir Augustus and Lady Chorlston and Miss Chorlston were practically the only persons present. The bride and bridegroom could have done very well without them, only they were not to be denied.

"It is one of the most romantic affairs," declared Lady Chorlston, "of which I have ever heard; and where romance is, there I must be."

And she was—in a gorgeous gown; Miss Chorlston was inclined to be malicious. Mrs. Stacey would have liked a floral wedding; something in the latest Chicago style with columns in the papers, and bagfuls of money spent on nonsense. But Ronald Denton was not to be beguiled, and his bride was as unpersuadable as he was.

"To think," observed Mrs. Stacey, quite audibly in the church, to Miss Chorlston who was at her side, "that those two slips of things standing up there at the altar, without even a bridesmaid and with not a flower in the place, 'should represent Andrew J.'s millions. When I was married half Chicago was there

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and the other half wanted to come. It was one of the finest things in weddings that ever was. There was nothing else talked of in the whole city for four and twenty hours, was there, George?"

"The recollections of that wedding is one of those things that linger."

Mr. Stacey's observations seemed to be both sententious and impersonal. His wife gave him a quick glance; but even she was unable to be sure of the meaning which his words were intended to convey. But apparently she had her doubts, for one felt that after her own fashion she was trying to get even with him.

"The worst of it is that a function like that is a precedent; when I marry again, it won't be easy to go one better."

Whether Mr. Stacey tried to hit back was not quite clear.

"It would be a blessed moment," he murmured, "for number two."

Just then the organ sounded; there was an organist.

"If it isn't all over!" cried Mrs. Stacey. "Why, it doesn't seem to have been any time at all."

When the newly-wedded pair were on their way to Dover, they commented on the ceremony which had lately taken place in a manner of their own. The bridegroom began:

"We're married at last, and it doesn't seem to have needed force either."

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The bride retorted: "I was rather expecting, at the very last moment, that it might have done."

The gentleman was magnanimous. "I'll forgive you. Between ourselves, do you feel any different now it's over?"

"I shan't tell you."

"Which means?"

"That I shan't tell you."

"Then I'll tell you. It's rather difficult to describe one's feelings, but I certainly do feel somehow different. I feel—oh, I don't know how I feel; but when I look at you, and see you sitting there, and realise—well, you know—I suppose that explains how I do feel."

"How very lucid you are. I'm afraid I haven't as great a gift of lucidity as you have, so I'd better say nothing."

The gentleman seemed suddenly to grow thoughtful. All at once, even against his will, his thoughts had travelled to the man who had lately been his partner. He had seen him once, in jail, when he was awaiting trial. The man had utterly broken down.

"You didn't hurt me," he said, "that crack on the skull you gave me was nothing; I deserved it. I've been a fool all through. When your father died everything was perfectly all right. But I had a feeling more than once that I'd like to have—a flutter. My income which came from my share of the business was not bad, but it didn't permit of what I called a

Two Wives

flutter—not a regular one. Your father kept a sharp eye on everything. But you, you were only a boy. I looked upon you as a kid. I took care that you kept your eyes on nothing. There were securities of all sorts in the strong boxes, our people's securities. I had a nibble at this, and a nibble at that, then I had a regular flare up. I got rid of a thousand pounds in a month—goodness knows how, I don't. I began to realise that that sort of thing couldn't go on, that I couldn't put the money back, and that exposure was bound to come. So I had spree after spree, and the money flew, and speculating on the Stock Exchange didn't make it go any slower. Then there came a letter advising me that certain trust money was required for a certain purpose on a certain date. And the trust money wasn't there. I couldn't say who knew where it was. I didn't. So I thought the time had come to make a clean breast of it to you and make an end of it. I told you that we were jointly responsible for the safety of those trust moneys, and that you would be called to account for them as well as I—that you would have to pay the penalty if they weren't there. Then you made those few candid remarks which ended in your giving me a crack on the skull. It was two or three days before I was worth anything—you had hit rather hard—and then I realised what kind of a thing I was, and I resolved that I wouldn't become a still meaner worm by trying to shuffle part of the responsibility of what I'd done on to you. So I didn't. I just told the truth. And

Love in Fetters

the result is that you're there and I'm here—you're outside and I'm in, and I take it that I'm going to stay in for quite a while. I understand that you're going—well, that you're going where money is."

Ronald nodded. He could not trust himself to speak. The allusion was a little unexpected, and the man's face, attitude, bearing, was so eloquent of misery, shame, despair, that he was conscious that something was happening to him within for which he could not account. As usual, in moments of emotion, he was tongue-tied. But Osborne seemed to understand his silence.

"I've got a wife," he went on. "You wouldn't think it from the sort of thing I am, and the kind of things I've done; but I have, and no man could want a better. And we've got two children, one five and the other three years old. She's stuck to me in spite of all that's come out, and her people have objected. They are of opinion that she ought to turn her back on me for ever; but she won't, thank God! So it looks as if they had turned their backs on her. I'm told that the house has been sold up, and that there's practically nothing left for her, and God knows how she's living, and how she's going to live. I was only thinking that if—if you could spare her, say, a pound a week—her people won't give her a farthing unless she promises not to have anything more to do with me—till I come out, it would be such a comfort. She's a first-rate manager, and could live on that, I think."

Two Wives

There were tears in the speaker's eyes; Ronald was not sure that there were not tears in his own. He went straight away and told Alice what Osborne had told him. That afternoon they called on Mrs. Osborne. It must have been rather a singular interview. When she left Mrs. Osborne took her two babies in her arms, and she cried over them, and she gave utterance to at least one remark which almost hinted at hysteria.

"If they ever tell you that there are no such things as miracles, don't you believe them, because there are—and there's an angel too."

A few days afterwards Edward Osborne was sentenced to five years' penal servitude. As the sentence was pronounced, he leaned over, and he whispered to his counsel—there was actually a smile on his face.

"I don't care, Betty is provided for."

Betty was the name of his wife.

Ronald Denton was thinking of these things as he sat facing his own wife in the compartment in that Dover train. He leaned forward, and he took both her hands in his, and he said:

"Alice, it's absolutely, utterly impossible for me to tell you how I'm feeling."

It was probably because she did not know of what he was thinking that she wondered what he meant.

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